

The Bargain

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The Bargain

by [Lotus_Fantasy](#)

Summary

The Avengers couldn't have imagined a year after the devastation in New York they'd be providing safe harbor to the very man they fought so hard to defeat. But with an unknown enemy after Loki for knowledge of a deadly weapon, perhaps the old adage 'Keep friends close and enemies closer' is simply the wisest course of action. And Loki isn't the only unhappy one. IronFrost.

First Installment

Post Avengers, Post Thor 2

- I've tweaked the ending of Thor 2: The Dark World to assume Loki simply disappeared after he led Thor to believe he died. I've given him new motives altogether. Also, I'm playing fast and loose with Norse mythology and the Avengers comic world.

Enjoy. :)

First Installment: A Safe Place

"Let me get this straight. You want us to set aside our feelings on the matter and let Loki stay here. The psychopath who destroyed several city blocks in New York less than a year ago. And you actually want us to protect him."

Thor sighed quietly. *It is not as though I expected this to be easy.* "I know how you feel. I understand your reluctance, I truly do. But I would not be here if I thought there were a better alternative."

The group of men and women who called themselves the Avengers—of which Thor was proud to be a part—stood before him. They were a . . . what was the Earth vernacular? A motley crew. Two assassins, a military man out of time, a businessman, and a scientist. It was difficult to believe that only nine months ago he had fought alongside them to protect Midgard from the Chitauri.

And Loki. Thor resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose as he'd seen Bruce Banner do on numerous occasions.

"I want to know more about this Æsa," Steve Rogers said into the silence, "and why you're asking us not to tell SHIELD about her."

"The witch has set her sights on something called the Aether," Thor explained. "She has learned that only Loki knows where it can be found."

"And this Aether is powerful," Steve said.

"Extremely," Thor confirmed.

Tony Stark, who'd remained uncharacteristically quiet, seemed to reach the end of his rope. "This isn't a recipe for disaster at all. Is this witch more powerful than Loki?"

"No," Thor said slowly, "but she has two very dangerous allies. Loki told me he has been captured twice." It still pained him to think of it. "Both times he barely escaped with his life."

"They can't be that dangerous if the slippery bastard escaped them twice," Clint Barton said, voice laced with venom.

Thor leveled him with a calm look. "You didn't see the evidence of Loki's capture on his flesh."

"Serves him right, then," Barton snapped. "Let them have him."

Patience beginning to fray, Thor opened his mouth to retort.

Steve beat him to the punch. "No," he said. "Nothing good could come from allowing them to get their hands on Loki. What if they got the location of the Aether from him? Loki isn't an entirely unknown entity, but this witch and her allies are. That makes them more of a threat to Earth."

The words almost made Thor smile. A year ago, they wouldn't have been something he'd ever expect to hear. "The witch has already made plain her intentions have deadly repercussions not just for Midgard but for all the Nine Realms."

"I don't like this, but it seems we don't have much choice," Natasha Romanova said. "Unless you think we can convince Loki to just give us the Aether for safekeeping?"

Thor's lips twitched. "I already tried. And believe it or not, it's better this way. I trust Loki when he says his only motivation is to keep the Aether from falling into the witch's hands. He has seen firsthand the destructive power of the Aether, and he knows not even he can safely contain it."

Bruce Banner shifted. "If we do this, can we even guarantee he'll keep his word to . . . behave?"

A valid question. One, unfortunately, for which Thor didn't have a confident answer. He wanted to say yes, but he owed his friends the truth. "I cannot be sure," he admitted. "I believe he sees the benefit far outweighs the risk . . ."

"But it's Loki," Natasha murmured.

Once again, Steve took the lead. "I agree with Nat, we don't have a choice. What I still don't understand is why you don't want us to report it to SHIELD."

"I've convinced Loki to help you defeat the witch," Thor replied, "and if SHIELD decides they want to imprison him, that can't happen." And his brother had suffered enough.

"I thought you were over that whole, protecting the little brother thing," Tony quipped.

Thor looked at him. "Much has happened since we returned to Asgard, my friend. Loki helped me defeat one of the worst enemies we'd faced in centuries."

"That asshole who banged up London?" Tony said, raising an eyebrow. "I thought that was all you and Jane Foster."

"It was a battle staged on two fronts," Thor said, "and Loki saved my life. And Jane's."

"Seems a little out of character," Bruce commented.

"All right," Steve said, sounding decisive. "I think we have to do this, but it's not just my decision. We either all agree, or we don't do it."

As the others all exchanged looks, Thor studied them in silence. He knew Bruce and Natasha would most likely agree with Steve. Clint would vehemently protest. And Stark . . . well, Stark could swing either way.

"I don't like it, but I agree," Natasha said. "We have to do this."

Bruce nodded. "But we can take precautions, right?"

"Bet your green monster ass we will," Tony piped up.

This time, Thor allowed himself to smile.

"Guess I'm outnumbered," Clint muttered. "Just keep him away from me, all right?"

"Are you going to stay here and help us keep an eye on him?" Natasha asked. "Aside from Dr. Banner, you're the only one who can . . . contain him."

"I will stay," Thor promised, "and do as much as I can. I thank you, my friends."

"So when can we expect our new housemate?" Tony grumbled.

"I will bring him tonight," Thor replied. Rising, he made sure to let them all see the gratitude in his eyes before reaching up and touching the amulet Loki had given him. Stark Tower disappeared.

Vanaheim's village reappeared around him. He walked into the inn, nodding to the proprietor who smiled. Up a single flight of stairs, Loki was still in the small room where Thor had left him. His brother hadn't moved, either. His green eyes tracked Thor immediately, and a tired smile graced his lips. If Loki meant it to be mocking or snide, he failed at both.

"So, did they agree?"

"They did," Thor said, sinking down into the chair by the bed.

Loki looked surprised. "It seems I am not the only one with the ability to charm others into doing as I require."

The words irritated Thor. "It required no charm, brother. I simply told them the truth."

"Which truth would that be?"

"That for the moment, keeping you away from the witch serves to protect Midgard."

Loki's grin seemed more lively now. "A spin to make it more appealing. Still an unusual approach for you."

"You do not endear yourself to people, Loki."

At that his brother actually laughed. It was strangely good to see. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight," Thor said. "Have you been able to heal yourself to any degree?"

"Not as much as I would like. I'm afraid I've expended so much magic these last two weeks it will most likely take me as long to recover it. I'm not in any danger of expiring, so save your concern."

Thor held up the amulet. "This will only take one of us back to Midgard. Do you have the strength to enhance the effect?"

"Barely," Loki replied, sitting up. "I'll be helpless when I'm done, Thor."

As close to a request for help as Thor had heard him come in a long time. It brought old instincts back. He'd thought them dead. "I'll protect you."

Loki gave him a somewhat flat look, holding out his hand. Thor gave him the amulet. *I wonder where he learned to do this. Or did he always have skills like these?* Loki held the amulet between his palms, and a pale green light sprang up between them. The amulet started to glitter like a million angry diamonds, and Loki closed his eyes.

Thor had no idea what would happen or how to tell when Loki was done, but after about ten

seconds his brother crumpled as if his spine had been severed. Lunging forward, Thor caught him before his brother connected face-first with the floor. The amulet let out a high, clear note as it struck the floor.

"Thanks," Loki slurred, sounding drunk or barely conscious.

His countenance made Thor wince. Paler than ever, the shadows chasing themselves across Loki's face made him look but a breath from dying. And he could feel the thin body in his arms trembling. "Are you all right?" he asked, gently manhandling his brother more-or-less upright.

Loki sagged against him, one hand coming up to grab Thor's upper arm. "Just . . . just tired," he said slowly. It almost sounded as though he'd forgotten the question during the hesitation.

Despite his worry, Thor couldn't help a small smile. It reminded him of a time when he and Loki used to go out hunting or adventuring and Loki would use up too much magic and wind up in this very state. Sweeter, happier times.

"Why don't you sleep for a bit? There's time yet before we need leave."

"I'll . . . just . . ." Loki said, and the rest was incomprehensible.

Thor laid him down on the bed. "Sleep. I'll wake you when it's time to go."

Loki was already out.

oOo

When Thor woke Loki from a sleep so deep as to be disorienting, Loki rather wished he was dead. Then he shook off such maudlin self-pity. Yes, these last three weeks had been trying in the extreme. Yes, he'd endured quite a good deal of physical pain and abuse. But it wasn't more than he could handle, and just because his entire body felt raw didn't mean he should wish himself dead.

He still had so much he wanted to do with his life.

It didn't stop him from nearly retching all over Thor's shiny chainmail when his brother sat him upright. The pain was that intense. He shook his head, not sure if he was telling Thor to stop or trying to clear away the crimson cobwebs. He moved without thinking further, sure if he delayed he would stay on the bed. Swinging his legs over the edge of the surface, he heaved his thin body up.

That was, at least, his intention. Instead, he toppled forward and almost blacked out. Strong, thick arms caught and steadied him, but Loki couldn't so much as take a single step. The channels inside his body along which his seiðr flowed had been at last stripped, and the feel of it was absolute agony.

Shit. I'm going to lose consciousness. In front of Thor.

He realized he could feel the soothing rumble of Thor's voice reverberating through the Aesir's chest. He couldn't hear the words. The blood raging through his head beat a rhythm too loud for any other sound. Drawing in a labored breath, he was dismayed to hear it released in a ragged groan. He clutched at Thor's arms.

"We can't stay here," he finally made out Thor's words. "We have to go, brother. Can you make it?"

Loki was in too much pain to even feel chagrined at his own weakness. "Just . . . just help me," he managed faintly.

Thor obliged by hauling him more-or-less upright. Loki almost fainted again. After a few slow, deep breaths, however, he felt his senses return enough he could keep his balance with Thor's aid. Then he grimaced when he saw Thor pull out the amulet he'd enchanted. It was going to feel so wonderful when his own magic washed over him.

All I have to do is last until we reach that ridiculous tower. I can collapse after I'm alone in a room. As Thor activated the amulet, Loki held his breath at the painful rush. Still, he tried to focus on bringing the residual energy back into himself. A little trick he'd learned—eating magic to conserve energy.

It worked at least a little, enough that when the inn disappeared to be replaced with a familiar human structure he didn't immediately pass out. His treacherous legs wobbled dangerously, warning him he needed to be horizontal soon.

Though his vision was alarmingly dark at the edges, he could nevertheless see that the so-called Avengers were all gathered in front of him. Armed with their various weapons and warning looks, Loki almost laughed at the sheer absurdity of the situation.

You look prepared to deal with the scourge of the Nine. I assure you, a boisterous kitten could probably challenge me and win.

"Shit, you sure he's still alive?" he heard Tony Stark's voice say.

Now, why did he sound so far away?

"Not stopping the bastard smirking at us like that," Clint Barton's voice growled.

Thor hauled Loki forward several steps, and Loki only barely kept stride. "He needs a place to rest, Stark."

Please, Loki added silently, *before I collapse.*

"Kinda wanted the bastard to suffer for what he did," Stark muttered, "but this's not what I expected. You sure he's gonna survive?"

Loki almost laughed again. It resolved as a dry cough that brought the metallic taste of blood to his tongue. Wonderful.

There was a nauseating swirl of color and movement, then Loki was suddenly face-down in a very soft pillow. It took him a moment to realize he was now lying on a bed, and sure hands were unbuckling his armor and removing boots. Though it caused him a moment of irritation, Loki let it pass unvoiced. He didn't want to sleep in leather, and he certainly didn't have the energy to take it off himself.

He tried to aid Thor as best he could, but his limbs just didn't seem to be cooperating any longer. In fact, he was pretty sure he fell asleep before Thor finished.

Second Installment

Second Installment: Do You Remember

Tony Stark believed himself to be an equable, decent sort of person. He may not be *good*, but he wouldn't deliberately hurt others and he did enjoy protecting people with the rest of the Avengers. He also thought himself to be a little vindictive. Part of the Stark charm. Subsequently, he was a bit surprised when seeing such a bedraggled Loki wasn't satisfying even a little.

It rather tugged at the heartstrings. *Just 'cause I don't like the bastard doesn't mean I wish he would be tortured like that.* "Jarvis, keep running diagnostics on the Mark XIII, would ya?" he said absently, rising from his work bench and trotting out into the hall.

Stark Tower had become the unofficial headquarters for the Avengers. It was only ever inhabited by all of them during a crisis—the rest of the time they went their separate ways. It was a gathering place away from SHIELD, something on which both Stark and (surprisingly) the Captain had insisted. And now, it seemed, it was an impromptu medical center for one Norse god in extremely pitiful condition.

It was one of the weirdest things Tony had ever seen, Loki lying prone and corpse-like on a bed too big for his skinny frame. Had Loki always been this *thin*? Lean, sure. Lean and long and tough. But right now he looked thin and sickly and just plain pathetic. Thor had taken all of Loki's leather armor off, replacing it with a pair of dark grey sweatpants and a pine-green tee-shirt (*Where the hell did he get those, anyway?*).

"Stark? What are you doing?"

Tony glanced at Steve Rogers. Good ol' Captain America. He wondered if he should feel guilty for standing here in the room where they'd ensconced Loki, watching the downed god sleep. He shrugged. "Dunno. Guess I was coming to see if the last twenty-four hours were a dream."

Steve actually chuckled. "It does seem a little . . . surreal."

Tony snorted. "More than a little."

The captain leaned against the doorjamb. "I feel guilty for preferring him this way to . . ."

Tony held up a hand. "No need to finish that sentence, Cap. I completely agree."

Steve stirred, then lowered his voice. "Shouldn't we be whispering?"

Tony grinned. "Thor said we could parade a marching band through here and Loki wouldn't so much as twitch."

Nodding toward the hall, Steve gestured Tony to follow him. He closed the door, and the pair walked to the open foyer Tony had set up as a nice entertainment space. *To think, less than a year ago that guy was throwing me out that very window. And here I am feeling sorry for him.* Tony shook his head. Would life ever not be weird as shit?

The other Avengers had gathered. Tony almost did a double take. Thor was in a pair of faded blue jeans and a dark gray tee shirt. His long blond hair had been pulled back, and he looked like he could've been any fellow from Earth. Large fellow.

"How pedestrian," he murmured to himself, grinning. *Where the hell did he get those clothes? Do all Asgardians pack spares when they come to Midgard?*

"I think we should decide what to do when Loki wakes up," Steve said.

"Knock him out again?" Clint growled.

Thor gave him a dark look. "Loki is weakened because of his constant battles," he said, tone sounding like a warning, "but he will recover quickly."

In other words, we won't be able to, Tony thought, thinking of their last battle with the fallen god. Loki might be a sociopathic megalomaniac who could actually be kind of charming, but damn could he take a hit.

"Fact is," he voiced his thoughts aloud, "every single one of us challenged him—well, almost all of us—and he only surrendered after we shut his damn portal. We never actually succeeded in knocking him out then."

"Loki has agreed to cooperate and remain here in Stark Tower," Thor said, sounding confident his slippery little brother would obey.

"As what?" Tony demanded. "A houseguest? An ally? A prisoner?"

Thor gave him a stony look. "Does it matter?"

"Uh, hugely," Tony said.

"I think what Tony means is," Bruce piped up gently, "how are we supposed to treat him?"

"As the threat he is," Thor said without hesitation, "but with respect just the same. Loki will help us defeat the witch. He is the only one who knows how."

"And his word is *so* trustworthy," Clint grumbled.

Tony tried to decide if he thought Clint was being annoyingly negative or just realistic. *Both*, he resolved.

Thor looked troubled. "I will be here," he said, not disputing Loki's tendencies. "I do not believe Loki means to attack Midgard again, but I will be here to ensure he does not."

"That's comforting, big guy," Tony said, flippant despite his actual sincerity. "Are we expected to be chummy?"

Thor's lips twitched in a smile. "I would suggest civil so he has little reason to lash out."

Good advice. The last time Loki had lashed out at Tony, he'd been thrown out the window. Not a scenario he was eager to repeat.

"We have no defenses against his magic," Steve said abruptly.

Folding his arms, Tony drummed his fingers against them. "I've been thinking about that, too. What do you think, Banner? Wanna help me figure out a way to counteract it?"

Bruce looked faintly surprised. "Sure. Not a bad idea."

"Not my worst," Tony said with a grin.

Thor chuckled. "I will help if I can. Perhaps Loki will even help."

Tony did a good job of nearly choking on his tongue. "Sure, why the hell not? Hey, Loki. I know you're crazier than a bag of cats and twice as evil, but you wanna help me and Mr. Hyde over here figure out a way to defeat your magic?"

Shrugging in a gesture that made him look weirdly lazy, Thor ignored the sarcasm and looked thoughtful. "Loki loves making deals. You might be able to bargain for his cooperation."

Hmm. Well, that was something to think about. Tony filed that information away in his mind vault. "Well, glad we had this little chat. Banner? Feel like getting busy before our resident psychopath wakes up and makes good on all previous threats?"

A smile teased the physicist's lips as he followed Tony down to the lab. Realistically, Tony had no idea how to counteract magic. But the first step was research, something at which he and Banner excelled.

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Loki's eyes snapped open with a full-body jolt, and he immediately looked around in alarm. He was lying on a bed. A significant improvement from the last time he'd fallen asleep. His memory filled him in a second later. Stark Tower. Midgard. Arguably the safest place for him right now. The sheer irony made him grin. Then he winced. Even his face hurt.

Gingerly, he pushed himself onto his side and peered at his hands. However long he'd been asleep, it wasn't nearly long enough. His seiðr hadn't recovered much, and irritation flared through him. *It isn't bad enough you chase and torment me through my waking hours, but you harass me in my sleep as well, witch?* It took an absurd effort, but Loki managed to lever himself into a sitting position.

Æsa. The hag was an old powerful witch who had sought Loki out shortly after he'd fooled his trusting brother into believing him dead. He'd encountered Æsa a handful of times as he traveled around searching for the Aether. He had instantly disliked her, though he offered her the same chance he offered everyone who had something he wanted: to make a deal with him.

She'd refused.

"I was curious," she said. "What sort of creatures slips so skillfully through my shadows, evading notice of even the most watchful eye?"

Æsa's interest in him had changed when he found the Aether. Then she eagerly begged him to make a deal with her.

He'd refused.

"You have nothing I want. I might have been inclined to share had you given me what I needed then. Now, I have no need of you at all."

It began their war. Twice had Æsa captured him, and twice had he escaped. The last time, he'd almost thought her dead, but she somehow survived his parting gift. Now Loki wanted a safe place to rest for a time while he recovered and erased all traces of the Aether from the Nine.

When next we meet, witch, it will be the last. I know I've convinced Thor you must be destroyed, he will convince his human friends of the same. Mortal they might be, but they have the skill to challenge you. Possibly even to win. A smirk teased his lips.

He looked around the room. It was sparsely furnished with a huge bed and a small desk. The chair at the desk wasn't padded, and a large red rug splayed at the foot of the bed. The color mesmerized Loki for a moment. He was far too used to brown, gray, and white.

There were two doors. Loki recognized the one leading out of this room. Rising, he only barely managed to keep his feet. He half walked, half stumbled to it and pressed his palm to the doorknob. Green light swirled around it, and that effort almost cost Loki his consciousness. But when the ward was done, he felt a measure of security.

Then he staggered to the other door. It led to a bathroom. Pleased, Loki shed his Midgardian apparel and stepped into the shower stall. In moments, steaming hot water cascaded down on him. It hurt so much he wanted to weep, but it felt glorious. Blood and grime streaked off his body and swirled down the drain.

Soon, the heat filled the bathroom until he felt faint with it. He picked up a bottle of cleansing product. The smell was sharp and strange, an unnatural edge to the floral overtone. He ignored it, wanting to be clean more than anything.

It felt like the water washed the filth of alien hands away, too. Loki smirked as he watched it. *You actually thought you could break me. I have endured so much worse than you could imagine, witch. But keep dreaming, if it pleases you. It will make your inevitable defeat ever so much sweeter.*

Soon, he turned the shower off and stepped out. He knew he was about to collapse again, so he quickly dried his aching body. He didn't bother with clothing as he sagged back into the bed. He pulled the blankets up over his ribs as the beckoning darkness of sleep drew him back in.

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After two days, Thor was more than a little worried about Loki. His brother hadn't emerged, and somehow he'd found the energy to erect a potent ward around his room. Thor couldn't even touch the door handle, it repelled him so fiercely. It repelled all others, though, when he asked Steve and Natasha to try.

It was infuriating, because he wanted to make sure Loki was all right but couldn't. He had no idea what his brother's condition might be. Though he couldn't use magic himself and didn't know much about it, he knew being drained couldn't be easy for his brother. He also knew Loki's body would heal at a normal rate without it, instead of the usual accelerated healing of the Aesir.

"So what can you tell me about this witch?" Steve Rogers asked, folding his hands and reminding Thor of one of his tutors back home.

He unconsciously smiled. *Loki always dismissed them. Said they had nothing to teach him.* "I'm afraid Loki knows much more of her than I, but I'll tell you everything he told me."

Steve nodded. "I'd appreciate it. Anything that helps us understand what we're up against."

Thor spread his fingers on the smooth table. "She's known as the shadow witch. She has always lurked in darkness, and she is at her most powerful there. She's as old as Odin, and Loki told me she challenged him once during an old war. There was no clear victor to their battles, but she eventually withdrew and disappeared. Loki said our father tried to hunt her down, but he never could find her."

"So she's clever," Steve said, brow furrowing.

"But no more so than Loki," Thor said. "My brother wanted to be found. And as long as he needs the safety of this place, Loki will make no aggressive moves. But make no mistake—he is not an ally." Thor's personal wishes aside.

Steve looked at him in silence for a time. "You've changed."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"You seem . . . I don't know. Wiser?"

Thor had to smile at his tact. "I have opened my eyes. I have accepted everything my brother is and is not."

"You've forgiven him?"

Nodding, Thor gazed absently out the huge windows. "Yes. I thought him dead. I only recently found him, and only because he allowed it. I was angry, of course, but . . ."

"He's your brother," Steve said quietly.

Thor smiled at him. "Concerning the witch, Loki isn't exactly sure if she wants aught but the Aether, but I believe his sincerity that it must never be found."

"And Loki is the only one who knows where this Aether is?"

"Yes," Thor replied, "much as it chills me. Though in his words, he doesn't know precisely where it is, but only where to find it. He hid it where it would remain hidden even from him."

"And conveniently ensure he can't be killed," Steve muttered.

A darker way to look at it, but Thor couldn't disagree. So he merely nodded.

"Tell me about this Aether," the captain said. "What is it?"

Sighing, Thor leaned back. More difficult altogether to describe. "A form of liquid energy. It is formless, thoughtless, and cannot be destroyed. It is old as life itself. By itself, it is nothing. In the wrong hands, it becomes a weapon more powerful and terrifying than the tesseract and all the caskets and relics of equal power."

Steve grimaced. "Something we shouldn't mess with."

Thor nodded. "I had thought Jane Foster and I banished it to a place it could never be found. Loki proved me wrong." A touch of chagrin. "He told me he'd considered taking it into himself just as Malekith attempted. But in his research, he realized the Aether would only consume him and become all the stronger and more dangerous for it."

For once, Thor was desperately grateful for his brother's penchant for burying his nose in dusty old tomes. "He also said he believes that if it consumes a powerful sorcerer, it would awaken to a kind of sentience."

Blinking, Steve folded his hands. "So it would become a weapon in its own hands."

"As I understand it," Thor confirmed, "though Loki said it wouldn't quite be self-aware. My brother has a deep love of power and mystery, but if even he deemed the Aether too dangerous . . ."

"It's bad news," Steve murmured. "Will he change his mind about using it?"

"No," Thor said. Of that he was certain. As to his motives for keeping it from the hands of anyone else . . .

The captain rolled his shoulders, seeming put at ease. "That's something, at least. Do you know anything about these two allies of the witch?"

"Less than the witch," Thor admitted. "Loki wouldn't speak of them, but I do know one of them is responsible for Loki's torture when he was captured."

"Something to discuss when he wakes up," Steve said. "Speaking of, is he okay in there? Does he need to . . . eat?"

"Eventually," Thor said, feeling a fresh stirring of concern. "I believe he put up that ward out of concern for his own safety, but—"

"Well, I'm at a loss," Tony Stark's voice interrupted as the man himself strolled to the bar on the other side of the room. Bruce Banner trailed him, looking tired. "We've been at this for two days and I don't feel particularly enlightened."

"You haven't made any progress?" Steve asked, looking disappointed.

Bruce accepted a glass with a few fingers of amber-colored liquid. "Trouble is, we don't really know what we're doing. They don't teach magic in Physics 101."

Thor smiled. "Even the scholars in Asgard are somewhat at a loss to describe it. To further complicate the matter, my mother used to say magic is different for all who possess it."

Tony flopped down with his own glass of liquor. "Great. Now you tell me."

"I still believe Loki would—" Thor began, but he trailed off when an unusual sensation crawled up his spine and whispered over his mind.

"Thor?" Steve said.

It took Thor several moments, but soon he realized what he was feeling. It was something he hadn't felt since he was child. "He's calling for me," he said, caught completely off guard. "He hasn't called for me like this since we were children." He stood up and headed for the elevator.

"Whoa, slow down big guy," Tony said, hopping up. "What're you talking about?"

"Loki needs me," Thor explained, patiently waiting while Tony operated the elevator. He was growing more confident with Midgard technology, but he wasn't an expert yet. "This was one of the first tricks he learned." He couldn't help smiling at fond memories. "We would sneak away together, and if he got himself into trouble he would call for me to help him."

"And he's calling for you now?" Tony asked, sounding suspicious.

"Yes," Thor confirmed. "I am just as shocked as you. Loki stopped asking me for help a long, long time ago."

"What does it feel like?" Tony asked, following Thor into the elevator.

Thor considered. "It's difficult to describe. It's a sudden knowing with my name attached to it." He smiled.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "That's massively unhelpful. Does it tickle? Sting? Burn?"

"No," Thor replied. "It is more subtle than that." He shrugged one shoulder. "I just know he needs me, it feels as though he spoke my name right into my mind."

"Hmph," Tony said, looking unsatisfied as he trotted after Thor off the elevator. "So is it tingly?"

Thor chuckled. "Perhaps a little." He stopped in front of Loki's door and placed a palm on Tony's chest to stop the human from moving. "You will not wish to follow me beyond the threshold. Loki's ward will repel you."

Tony's eyes abruptly went wide and starry. "The ward! You're a genius. Enjoy talking to the princess!" He jogged back to the elevator.

Mystified but in good humor, Thor just shook his head and turned the doorknob. He could feel a tingle of raw energy, but this time it simply enveloped him without burning. He opened the door and stepped through. The ward rippled around him and allowed it. He closed the door.

Loki was lying on his stomach on the bed, looking as pale and thin and terrible as the last time Thor had seen him. As Thor crossed to him, he thought his brother might still be asleep. But no, weary green eyes opened. They were dark, and Loki looked for all the world like a hunted animal. He pushed himself up on one elbow as Thor perched on the edge of the bed.

He didn't touch Loki. "You don't look any better," he observed.

"Nor am I," Loki said, voice dry and waspish. "I retreat into sleep only to find she's found me in my dreams. She dogs and torments my every step." He looked like he'd swallowed acid. "I need your help, Thor."

He looked so angry, so tired, so wounded. Thor resisted the urge to reach out and brush lank ebony hair off his brother's forehead. "Tell me what I can do."

"Do you remember how to dreamwalk?"

Thor blinked. "Of course." Another thing he and his brother used to do when children. Loki had taught Thor how to dreamwalk so they could continue their adventures even after sleep. They'd spent many, many hours that way.

"The witch has me trapped in a dreamscape of her making," Loki said, irritation adding a snap to his voice. "I'm too weak to break out of it and build up protective barriers so she can't find me. I need you to dreamwalk with me and do it for me."

Thor felt a pang. He knew this couldn't be easy for his proud, damaged brother. *Asking me for help when he already resents me.* Though Thor felt Loki's actions nine months ago were absurdly too extreme, he did understand his brother's feeling of helpless jealousy. It was something he'd come to accept because he also understood something more important.

Despite his anger or perhaps in spite of it, Loki still loved Thor.

"Of course," he said again, keeping his tone casual. As if there was nothing special about Loki's request.

And was that gratitude that flickered through Loki's tired eyes? "I think I have enough strength to take us both into the dreamscape together," he said, lying back and shifting sideways.

Thor toed off his shoes and climbed up onto the bed. Though he badly wanted to gather Loki against his chest and hold him, he simply lay down so their shoulders were touching. Loki's cold,

cold hand landed lightly on top of his wrist.

A few heartbeats later, he was in the dreamscape. People normally only floated along the surface here, barely connecting with it when they dreamed. Most lacked the knowledge or the talent to enter, but Loki had learned young it was possible and of course made it happen.

You've always been clever, Loki. So clever. If you could put aside your hate, you would have made a wonderful ruler. You've always been able to do whatever you set your mind to.

The dream inside which Loki was trapped was a small space with high walls and a dark sky. Thor looked around. Loki's dreamscapes had always been wild and chaotic, changing constantly so as to provide an interesting challenge. Thor grimaced. This was meant to be a cage and nothing more.

Loki stood in the center, wearing simple Asgardian attire. He gestured to the wall. "This is of her making. She comes here frequently to torment me. Break it down and build a new one. I trust you remember how to do that?"

Thor nodded. Building walls in the dreamscape was as easy as wanting them there. A desire to protect made manifest. Thor may not implicitly trust Loki any longer, but he did still wish to protect him. "How do I break them down?" he asked, looking around for some tool and finding nothing.

"With Mjöltnir," Loki said as though it were obvious.

"But . . ." Thor protested weakly. "This is the dreamscape."

"Yes," Loki agreed, a faint glitter of mischief in his eye. "Anything is possible here. So make her appear."

Taking a deep breath, Thor concentrated. A familiar weight simply appeared in his hand. He hefted it experimentally. "This isn't truly Mjöltnir," he said.

"There's no reason to believe she won't respond to you here the way she responds to you there," Loki said, lowering himself into a sitting position. "Please begin, Thor. Until my dreams are sealed from her, I will get no rest."

Thor turned to the wall and swung the hammer. As he did, he felt a crackle of energy, and the wall crumbled beneath Mjöltnir's power like bricks made of clay. So, this would be easier than expected. Thor swung the hammer again.

In an eye blink, the witch appeared. "Stop!" she spat, orange-gold energy swirling around her hands. "This is my dreamscape! How dare you destroy it, son of Odin!"

"No," Thor said, Mjöltnir thrumming in his grip, "this is Loki's dreamscape, and you are not welcome here, witch. Begone." Lighting blazed around the hammer as he threw it.

She vanished in an orange haze, and Mjöltnir veered back into Thor's hand. He resumed his task of breaking down the walls. As he worked, Loki's eyes never left him. As segment after segment crumbled into black dust, it seemed Loki's intensity melted into relief. Then it was done, and the bleak dreamscape abruptly shifted into the chaotic color Thor remembered.

He didn't wait for Loki's direction to build new walls. Mjöltnir vanished, his need of her done. Concentrating on building a new wall was a different task than destroying one, but Thor was up to it. The first segment rose, and it was easier after that. In less time than he'd expected, a sky blue wall had replaced the old one.

As he stepped back, satisfied, his brother rose to his feet. Placing his hand on the new wall, he closed his eyes.

"It's strong," he murmured, shoulders slumping and body seeming to cave in on itself.

Thor caught him before he hit the dreamscape ground. Even here, he was too tired and weak to stay awake. Gently, he lowered his brother to the soft violet grass. "Rest, brother," he whispered, curling his body around Loki. "She can torment you no longer."

Loki melted against him, and the swirling colors around him settled.

Thor came awake sometime after that, and he started a little to find himself cradling Loki on the bed. Smiling a little, he carefully extricated himself. Already his brother looked more peaceful. Drawing the blankets up over Loki's naked shoulders, Thor opened the door and passed through Loki's ward.

He would let Loki sleep for another day. Then he would wake him and make sure he ate.

Third Installment

Third Installment: Turning the Storm

The shock on Thor's face was actually somewhat less than Loki had expected, but he could still feel it rolling off his brother in waves. There was also a subtle threat of violence. Thor was angry, and he was trying to control his temper. Loki still smiled at the changes in his brother. No, he quickly amended. Not his brother.

His enemy? His ally? He wondered if he would ever have a satisfactory answer to that quandary.

"Why are you smiling?" Thor said after a moment. His voice was deceptively calm.

The anger seethed in his sky blue eyes.

Loki wished he was stronger. He wished he could have waited a little longer to bring Thor here. Soon, he promised his wailing body. Soon, we can rest. Right now, he couldn't afford to show weakness. Not until Thor's temper had abated. And to do that, he would need to manipulate his brother's emotional responses just so.

No, he amended again. Not my brother.

"I apologize, Thor," he said in a carefully moderated tone. "I was merely thinking you've changed."

A bit of the anger mellowed into surprise, but only for a moment. "It's been nine months since you died in my arms in Svartalfheim," he said after a pause. "And here you are."

Surprisingly reluctant to lie, Loki considered for a second what he wanted to say. He settled on what he hoped was both neutral and non-explosive. "It was necessary."

Thor's lips quirked. "It was necessary to imprison you in Asgard. It was necessary to work with you to protect Jane Foster and the Nine from Malekith. Those things were necessary."

That didn't diminish Loki's desire to smile. Yes, his brother—Thor had changed. How interesting. "It was not my intent to cause you pain, Thor. I did what I had to after I realized the Aether could not be destroyed."

The words seemed to give Thor pause. "Is that why you let me believe you dead? So you could chase after the Aether? So you could become exactly what we fought to destroy in Malekith?"

His tone made Loki wary. If Thor decided to attack him and drag him back to Asgard, he wouldn't be able to lift a finger to stop him. It was taking all his strength just to remain standing.

"No," he said. Splitting focus between not falling over and speaking carefully cost him a great deal. "The opposite, in fact."

Finally, the tension in Thor's shoulders eased a little. Just a little, but it was enough. "What do you mean?"

Deciding on brutal honesty, Loki rolled his shoulders in a small shrug. "I was interested in the Aether. I had certainly considered absorbing it as Malekith tried. But, perhaps I'm more realistic than he? I wanted to make sure I could survive such a union. I learned that while I would survive much longer than your lovely Midgardian paramour, the Aether would eventually consume me.

That is precisely when I lost interest in repeating Malekith's mistakes and gained a keen interest in finishing what you started."

More of the imminent threat in Thor's countenance melted away. "Destroying it? We already tried. We failed."

Loki nodded. "Yes, and your clever paramour managed to banish it and destroy Malekith." He smiled. Part of him wished he'd been there to see Jane Foster outsmart Thor Odinson. Not a difficult feat for the truly clever, but she was just a human. "The problem is, I found it."

And there returned the threat of violence. "You found it." Flat.

"It wasn't hard," Loki said. "If I could do it, so could someone else. Someone lacking my compunctions. So I hid it. Somewhere no one will ever be able to find it."

Now Thor looked a touch confused. "Then why am I here?"

Loki couldn't help a tiny grin. "Because you learned your dear brother was still alive and went rushing off to find him."

Thor actually seemed amused by that. "Loki, please. We both know the only reason I learned you yet live is because you wanted it that way. So tell me, why am I here?"

You have grown, Thor. I do not remember this quick-thinker who makes mental bridges in the gaps of his knowledge. He could feel his mind beginning to shut down. He wouldn't be able to maintain his illusion of perfect health much longer.

"Unfortunately," he said, "there's someone who learned what I did. I'm not sure how, but she knows I hid the Aether. And it seems she will not rest until I've given her its location. While I was more than skilled enough to evade her, she has allies. Two dangerous allies. I haven't been able to completely . . . defend myself against all three of them."

Perhaps he couldn't entirely conceal the way his body trembled. Perhaps Thor saw something in his eyes. Perhaps there was a barely audible tremor in his voice. Whatever it was, Thor suddenly closed the distance between them and grabbed Loki's arms, squeezing.

Loki was too tired, too drained, and too damn injured to do anything to avoid Thor's grasp.

"Am I facing an illusion?" the thunderer all but growled.

Well, Loki couldn't dodge forever anyway. He let his shoulders slump and dropped the illusion. The truth of his appearance brought shock crawling over Thor's face. He would see the sickly pale skin. The lank hair, unkempt and disregarded, longer than before. The bruises around Loki's mouth and throat. How thin his body had become. The unhealed wounds on his hands and wrists.

"What happened to you?" Thor whispered.

A mirthless laugh bubbled up from Loki's throat. "I have been hunted like an animal these last many weeks. Twice was I caught and caged like one. I was unable to escape unscathed."

"Let me see," Thor commanded, but his voice was much gentler now.

Loki resisted for a moment before giving in. He brushed Thor's hands away and gingerly removed his ornate leather armor. Thor made a sound of concern. His large hand reached out as if to touch, but it stopped short.

"You're badly injured," he commented.

As though Loki could possibly be unaware of that. "I was tortured."

Thor's sky-blue eyes looked troubled. "What did they do to you?"

Loki tried to remember the last time he'd heard Thor use that tone. "Use your imagination," he said dryly. "Æsa is nothing if not creative. Unfortunately, I've spent too much time being pursued and not enough time resting. I'm almost completely drained, Thor."

He hesitated just a breath before plunging in. "You have no reason to help me, but I'm asking." It grated. Oh, how it grated to be asking the God of Thunder for help.

But he had no choice. For his own sake and for the sake of everything else, he couldn't let Æsa get her hands on the Aether.

Thor looked surprised for a split second before it smoothed off his face. Then he looked contemplative. "Without telling the Allfather that you live," he said.

Not a question.

"Preferably," Loki said. Because it wasn't blatantly obvious that if Thor decided to turn him in right now, there wasn't a damn thing the younger could do.

"Your cell in Asgard might be the perfect place for you," Thor said, and was that a smile threatening on his lips? "You would be able to recover, and your pursuit wouldn't be able to reach you."

"Don't be naïve," Loki snapped. "Asgard is no place at all for me. If you truly believe that—"

Yes, there was the smile. "No, I don't believe that," Thor said. Definitely amused. "Before I agree to anything, you owe me the truth."

Loki's mind began to race. "If you agree to help me, I will tell you anything you wish to know." A dangerous bargain, but Loki desperately needed Thor.

Thor nodded. "I accept your terms. I will help you, I won't tell the Allfather, and you will answer my question."

Question. As in singular. Loki smiled and extended his hand. "I agree."

They clasped hands, and Loki winced at Thor's strong grip.

"Tell me why you betrayed me on Svartalfheim."

"I didn't betray you, Thor. I made you a promise that I would help you destroy the Aether. I did that. How exactly is it my fault that the Aether cannot, in fact, be destroyed?"

Thor took a single step forward. Though Loki did not fear Thor, he couldn't help the reflexive step backward. Movement seemed to sap the last of his strength. He sagged down onto the bed and knew he wouldn't be able to stand again.

The menacing expression on Thor's face didn't ease. "Do not play word games with me, Loki," the older warned. "Give me the truth."

Loki sighed quietly. "Whatever answer you wish to hear from me, Thor, it hardly makes a

difference now."

"If you refuse to keep your end of our bargain," Thor growled, "I'm leaving right now."

Loki didn't know if his brother would make good on that threat, but he relented all the same. He had made a deal. And he always kept his bargains. "I saw a chance for freedom," he answered honestly, "and a way to ensure you would not have to lie to Odin. What had I become to you, Thor, but as a limb infected with gangrene? Best to sever it and heal."

Another smile tugged at Thor's lips. "An ugly metaphor, brother. You were more like an animal once much loved that had gone rabid."

If Loki had any strength at all in his limbs, oh how he would make Thor pay for that smart remark. He could feel anger glittering in his eyes, but he chose to set his retort aside for now. "I will not apologize for wishing to escape a life of imprisonment," he said. "I had planned never to see you again. I wanted freedom and you wanted closure. My way was best for both."

"Did you mean what you said in my arms?" Thor asked softly.

He could have played dumb and pretended not to know to what his brother referred. Loki found he could not. "I . . ." he swallowed. "I regret none of my actions," he tried again. Everything else he wanted to say lodged in his throat and refused to pass his lips.

Thor's eyes searched his. He didn't press further. Instead he asked, "You once told me you never wanted the throne. Did you mean that?"

Though he'd only promised Thor one question, Loki felt compelled to answer nonetheless. "I did," he said simply.

After several heartbeats of tense silence, Thor abruptly nodded. "I know where you will be safe," he said. Another faint smile. "Though I doubt you will like it."

Fourth Installment

Fourth Installment: A Lack of Trust

"It's been three days. Exactly how does a person regenerate . . . magic?" Tony asked no one who would know the answer.

Namely Bruce, because his tightly-wound friend was the only person in the room. Bruce blinked, looking up from his screen in a confused manner.

"Was that a rhetorical question?"

Tony sighed, flipping his pen into the air. He didn't try to catch it, and it clattered to the floor. "Unfortunately."

The beginnings of a grin started on Bruce's face. "I could go wake up Loki and we could—"

"Yeah I'm gonna stop you right there Oz. Far as I'm concerned, a sleeping Loki is the best kind."

Banner chuckled.

Tony crossed his hands behind his neck and leaned back in his chair. "Magic. I seriously just said that. And I'm not a kid. And I'm not dreaming. Who the hell sits around and has conversations about magic?"

"I'm sure they do in Asgard," Banner suggested mildly.

Raising an eyebrow, Tony shot him a look. "Leave the sarcasm to me. I'm better at it."

"How do you know?" the other said, smile threatening again. "Maybe you just haven't seen that side of me, yet."

Now Tony chuckled. Then he frowned. "Wait, it was because of Loki we met up last time. Why do we always wait until there's a catastrophe before getting together for tea?"

"Is that what we're doing?"

"It should be. Jarvis, how about some tea?"

"Certainly, sir," the disembodied voice of his most faithful servant floated around them. "Shall I call back the maid?"

"Are you kidding?" Tony said, shuddering. "What if Loki woke up and threw her out a window?"

"An excellent point, sir," Jarvis agreed blandly. "Shall I—"

"Forget the tea," Tony cut him off. "Scan the damn force field again. And I don't want a list of anomalous energy spikes this time. I want hard, scientific data—"

"Sir, the ward no longer exists," Jarvis informed him.

Tony stopped dead. Well, shit. That could only mean one thing. His eyes met Banner's at the same moment, and he could see his friend having the same thought. *He's awake.*

They rose nearly as one, heading for the door to Tony's lab. "Jarvis, where is he? I want you to keep tabs on him at all times. If he comes anywhere near my lab, I want it to sound like World-fucking-War III."

"I'll emulate cataclysm when I sound the alarm," came the blasé response.

Damn Jarvis. "Where is he?"

"Top floor of the Tower," Jarvis said.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me!" Tony snapped, charging into the elevator with Banner on his heels.

"Forgive me sir, I will inform you of all his movements from now on."

"Please tell me he's not alone," Tony said as the elevator started moving.

"It would seem Masters Thor and Steve Rogers are both with him," Jarvis replied. "There is no need for panic, sir."

"Easy for you to say," Tony grumbled, folding his arms and willing the elevator to go faster. "He didn't throw *you* out a window."

"If it makes you feel better," Banner said in a tone as mild as Jarvis', "it probably won't happen again."

"Which part of that is supposed to make me feel better?" Tony demanded.

"Every part but the probably," Banner said.

Damn him, he was smirking. Of all the—! "Just because you got to slam him around like the Christmas toy you didn't want doesn't give you the right to be a smartass with those of us who—"

"Got their asses handed to them?" Banner finished lightly. "Would you rather I turn into the other guy and slam Loki around some more?"

"It just might make me feel better, yeah," Tony said, grinning a little. He really wished he'd been there to see it. To see that insufferably smug smirk wiped off the god's face.

The elevator dinged, and doors slid open. Tony resisted the urge to charge out like his ass was on fire, but only barely. The scene waiting for him was disturbingly domestic. Thor and Steve were sitting side-by-side, their chairs pulled closer to the couch. Loki himself was leaning back and looking completely relaxed.

And completely healed.

Loki. *I take it back when I said I felt sorry for him looking so bedraggled. I prefer him that way.* Because the fallen god sitting on the couch like a damn diva didn't look injured at all. The bruises were gone from his face, his skin wasn't death-white, and his eyes weren't dull with pain. They oriented on Tony, green and bright.

He smiled. No, it was a smirk. A small one, but it managed to take over Loki's entire face. Something knowing glittered in his emerald eyes, and Tony wanted to either deck him or turn around and run. Maybe both.

Thor and Steve looked up when Tony and Bruce entered, displaying an alarming lack of concern.

Thor actually smiled as though nothing at all were wrong.

"Stark," he said in a warm voice. "How comes your research?"

"Whoa, how about we keep that conversation for less volatile company?" Tony protested.

Tony and Bruce stopped a few feet from the couch. Banner cleared his throat.

"Loki," he said, voice measured and calm. "Wish I could say I was glad to see you feeling better."

Loki's eyes slid off Tony's face, now aiming his smirk at Banner. "You seem to be feeling better yourself," he said in that ridiculously smooth and cultured voice. "More in control."

Seriously, how could a voice sound like velvet and melted butter? Tony cleared his throat as he and Banner reached the threshold. Thor leaned back in his chair, bending his knee to rest his ankle on the opposite knee. The three of them looked like they were having a meeting over Sunday brunch. No armed guards, no keeping wary eyes on Loki, no guns, no keeping wary eyes on Loki, no chains (or at least handcuffs).

And why the hell wasn't anyone keeping wary eyes on Loki?

"Loki needs to eat," Thor stated. As casual as you please.

Tony glared to find Loki's eyes on him again. Something in his smirk said he knew exactly what was going through Tony's head. He folded elegant white hands over his thin waist.

"Relax Stark," he practically purred. "It's not as though I plan to throw you out the window. Again."

Ass. God-damned self-satisfied asshole.

Steve looked up at Tony with a small shrug. "It's not like we expected him to apologize, right?"

Loki actually laughed. Laughed as though Steve had made some joke instead of a valid point. It really, really pissed Tony off.

"Listen up, princess," he growled, taking a step forward. "You're in my Tower, my guest, my rules. First, I expect you to play nice. That means no funny business, and it means you speak politely or shut the fuck up. Unless you're contributing something, I don't wanna hear it."

Loki didn't look intimidated. If anything, he looked more amused. "I shall endeavor to be as un-funny as possible."

"What did I just say?" Tony snapped.

Loki spread his hands. "I believe my response was very polite."

"You kinda set yourself up for that, Stark," Steve commented.

"Wha—you're actually *agreeing* with him? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Steve's expression said he didn't want to touch that with a ten-foot pole. Tony felt his whole body tense when Loki abruptly stood up. He did so slowly, as though he wasn't fully recovered just yet. Tony felt glad for that. Then felt a teeny bit guilty for feeling glad. Only a teeny, tiny bit. He didn't take his eyes off Loki as the god walked to the great big window.

He seemed to gaze over the city, then he caught Tony's eye again. "I see you entirely erased the evidence of my passing. I do not begrudge the green monster for his actions against me. Why should you mine?"

"Uh, because he knew you wouldn't die from his," Tony said, folding his arms in agitation. "Did you know I wouldn't die? I'd say you were counting on it. I think everyone in this room forgives my little grudge."

Loki smiled. "As do I," he said, oh-so-magnanimous. "Had I known you would prove such a challenge to kill, I might have tried harder."

Tony suddenly *ached* to be in his suit. He didn't realize he'd taken several steps forward until Thor was in his way. The god of thunder looked at Loki. It wasn't quite a glare.

"Enough," he said. "Loki, remember our bargain and keep a civil tongue in your head."

He sounded more like a chiding parent (or big brother) than anything else, but Loki subsided with a last smirk.

Hm, Tony thought, I'll have to remember that. Thor made a bargain of some sort with him.

Loki turned back to the window. "I scanned the area, Thor. There is no activity, which means the witch either can't find me or knows better than to come here."

Glad to change the subject, Tony frowned. "You'll be able to tell if she comes here? To Earth?"

"I haven't sufficiently recovered to scan the entire planet," Loki said, "just the area around the Tower. In another few days, I should be able to remedy that."

Because that wasn't a horrifying thought. "How about you leave that to me?" Tony said. "All I need to do is calibrate my equipment to detect the right kind of energy or radiation. You're gonna help me with that."

Loki's eyes shimmered with amusement. And something a tad darker. "Am I? But not today, I think. The good Captain was suggesting a nice place to eat—"

"Ah hell no," Tony cut him off. "You're not setting foot outside this Tower."

The god of mischief turned to face him. The amusement was gone. "And who will stop me, Stark? You?"

Tony refused to be intimidated. "My Tower, my rules."

Thor put his hand on Tony's shoulder. "We cannot keep him locked up here," he said in a sympathetic-sounding tone. "Have no fear. Loki will cause no harm."

Something in his voice made that seem very important. Tony wasn't comforted. "This ain't Asgard," he said. "It'd be like turning a fox loose in a henhouse full of fat, slow chickens. And the more wandering around he does, the better chance SHIELD has of learning he's here. The very last place they want him."

"I am not your prisoner, Stark," Loki said, voice low. "I cannot heal without walking this world's surface and breathing its air."

"What, are you some kind of flower? And you're here because *you* need *us*, not the other way

around." Okay, not strictly true.

"I need nothing," Loki said, taking a single step toward Tony, "least of all—"

"Enough," Thor said again.

Loki finally switched his attention to his big brother, and the intent glittering in verdant eyes looked dangerously close to murder.

Tony abruptly realized why Loki didn't look so physically imposing anymore. He was wearing jeans and a tee shirt. And he was barefoot. No weapons, no armor, no helmet. He looked human. Unfairly tall and attractive, but human.

"We need each other," Steve said, finally coming toward them. "Tony, Loki already agreed to wear a device that restricts his magic while we're outside the Tower. And he will have an escort at all times, namely Thor."

Since it seemed he wasn't being given a say, Tony changed the subject, still glaring. "Where the hell did you get those clothes, anyway?"

Loki glanced down at himself. When he looked up, malice and mischief vied for dominance in his eyes. "Would you prefer this?" A wisp of green light, and suddenly he was clothed in his leather armor.

It took a great personal effort not to physically recoil. "Oh yeah, you'll blend right in. House rule: I never want to see that outfit again."

The leather was replaced by silk and cashmere. Tony resisted the urge not to roll his eyes. The guy still wouldn't blend in very well. But it was better than the alternative.

"I would like to go now," Loki said, striding past Tony and stopping in front of Thor. His gait was slow and a bit halting. "I've grown quite tired of my body's current state."

"At least you can't get into too much trouble like this," Tony muttered.

Loki's smirk told him the god heard.

oOo

Despite the chill breeze, it felt good to walk outside through relatively clean air. Loki kept between Steve Rogers and Thor, too grateful for the near-complete lack of pain to cause either of them grief. Or even to protest the large silver cuff around his wrist. Unlike the manacles back in Asgard, this cuff didn't cut off his magic, simply restricted it.

That was fine. Loki's body still wasn't fully healed. He had the energy to walk the streets of this backward world, but pretty much nothing more.

"Should I be worried about random strangers recognizing me?" he inquired more out of curiosity than because he cared.

"No," Steve replied. "SHIELD made sure the public never really knew what happened that day. And even your one spectacle . . . well, you look a lot different like this."

Loki couldn't help a small laugh. "You humans are such hypocrites. You vehemently shut down my attempt at control, and yet you do it to each other whole-heartedly. My way would have been

no different than the current way. You simply would have bowed to a different master."

"Loki—" Thor began, the warning in his voice clear.

Loki chuckled, waving a hand. "Relax, Thor. That was an observation, not a forewarning. I really have no interest in Midgard. Why would I? There is no magic here."

His brother—no, *Thor*—looked mildly surprised.

"You seemed pretty interested in it nine months ago," Steve said, frowning.

Loki's mind drifted over the last two years of his life. It'd certainly taken many turns he couldn't possibly have foreseen. He saw no reason to complain.

"I would like to know why you did it," Thor said.

Lips twitching, Loki didn't look up at him. "I'm sure you would."

"So would I," Steve piped up. "It would go a long way toward earning our trust, Loki."

"A goal which is ever so important to me," Loki murmured. "Have I ever given the impression I care what you fool humans think?"

"*Loki*—" Thor snapped.

This time, Loki cut him off. "I believe the agreement was, I keep a 'civil tongue' in Stark Tower. We are not there."

"I would think earning a little good will should be your priority," Thor said, eyes narrowing, "since you are here relying on their generosity."

But that is the difference between me and them, Loki thought. *Their ridiculous moral codes require them to behave a certain way.* Just this once, Loki exercised restraint and didn't say anything aloud.

Well, nothing too inflammatory. "Fortunately, thanks to the witch, it need not be too high a priority."

Thor looked lost between amusement and incense.

Steve seemed not to care one way or the other. "I'd like to know everything about *Æsa*. Her power, her allies, her motives, everything."

Loki sighed softly. Ever the soldier. In truth, he would rather walk quietly and absorb the energies of Midgard without speaking. Restoring magic was best when one didn't divide his attention. Still, his own chances of surviving all this unscathed were higher if his unlikely allies—was that what they were?—knew as much as possible.

"She's not a threat to take lightly," he mused. "Her title, the shadow witch, is well deserved."

"Thor mentioned she's called that," Steve said, looking thoughtful. "Where did it come from?"

"The moniker was given to her by her enemies," Loki replied, "eons past. *Æsa* is a master manipulator of darkness. She can give it form, create weapons made of shadow, and move through it as though she herself were built of it. Naturally, light is her greatest weakness." He looked at Thor. "I'm told she once allied herself with the dark elves of Svartalfheim in an attempt to conquer Alfheim. They failed because Odin came to the aid of the Light Elves."

Thor frowned. "I've never heard that."

"It is history so ancient our tutors never taught it," Loki said, "and you never were one to sit and read if there were beasts to be slain and adventures to be had."

The elder Aesir's lips quirked. "But the adventures we had were grander for it."

Loki almost smiled. "You got very good at it," he agreed.

Thor's expression was soft. Fond.

Not wishing to hear anything sentimental coming from the other, Loki went on. "The second, his name is Surtr."

"The fire giant king?" Thor said, looking startled. "What has he to gain allying with the witch?"

Loki looked away, rueful. "His goal is not necessarily an allegiance with her, but rather my capture," he said. "I . . . acquired something which once belonged to him. A relic stolen from him ages past. I found it. He believes he is entitled to have it back."

"Well, is it his?" the captain inquired.

"It was," Loki replied.

"Then why don't you just give it back?" the human demanded, righteous anger blazing in his eyes.

"There would be no benefit to me in doing so," Loki said, an image popping into his mind of flicking the captain away like a little bug. "And it matters not. As soon as I located and obtained it, I gave it to another."

"What?" Thor said, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk and planting his large hand on Loki's slim chest. "I suppose I should have expected anything involving you to be convoluted, but I'm not following you. Why in Borr's name did you do that?"

Loki sighed, trying to keep a handle on his irritation. "It really is none of your business, and it doesn't at all matter."

"It matters," Steve cut in, now also barring Loki's path. "Motives are hugely important."

Taking a single step back, Loki slapped Thor's hand away. "I will not satisfy your morbid curiosity. I did not steal the relic from Surtr, and to whom I gave it is none of your concern. That individual is not the enemy, nor will they ever be. Leave it at that."

Thor's entire countenance said he wasn't satisfied with that answer, and they would revisit the subject. But for the moment, he backed down. "Surtr isn't an unknown entity," he said to the captain as they resumed their places flanking Loki. "It is also unlikely he would leave Muspelheim, preferring to send aid from afar."

"That is correct," Loki said, "but he did have a hand in my . . . torture . . . when I was captured both times. If it makes you feel better, his motives are completely different from the witch's. Likely knowledge you could use to your advantage."

The captain nodded. "I'll keep it in mind. You said he's a king? Could he mobilize an army of his people?"

"Against Midgard?" Loki said, scoffing. "Doubtful. Asgard would respond swiftly, and the last

time one of the realms attacked Midgard the result was total defeat. None are like to wish for a repeat performance."

"That's something, at least," Steve said, sounding thoughtful. "Who is the second ally?"

Loki's vision sort of hazed over. "They call him the Mad Titan," he murmured. His words he directed mainly at Thor. "When I fell from the Bifrost, I thought to die. I did not. I landed in the between, a place for no living being. It was the Mad Titan who found me there, half mad and mostly dead. I still do not know how."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "He created the weapon from the Tesseract's power. He commanded the Chitauri to follow me. He pointed me at Midgard." He paused, trying to decide how much to say. He settled on something neutral. "He was not the Chitauri's leader, but they obeyed him. They were his army, and you destroyed most of them. It was a great blow, so even he is less a threat than before."

"And he uses magic?" the captain asked.

"Yes," Loki said, "although he artificially augments it."

"Did he make any other weapons like the scepter?" the human wanted to know.

Loki paused. "I don't know. Possibly. More than likely. His alliance with the witch is stronger than Surtr's. He wants revenge against me for losing his fool army, as well as a piece of the Aether. Unlike Surtr, he is not afraid of Odin and Asgard. That makes him more unpredictable. But do not mistake him for a fool."

Steve frowned, looking pensive.

Thor, too, remained silent for a time. Then, "Loki, I would like you to help Stark and Banner find a way to defend against magic."

Loki stopped. It took his guards a few steps to realize it and turn to face him. Loki glared at Thor, blood feeling hot with anger. "And make myself helpless to the Avengers? Has your brain decayed into dust, Thor? Or have you simply turned into the utter fool for which I have always taken you? *Nothing* could entice me into that!"

"If you do not-" Thor began.

"Don't you dare say you will turn me over to the Allfather," Loki snarled, preparing to flee if necessary. He had enough strength to leave this realm. "You already swore you would not-"

"That is not what I was going to say," Thor interrupted. "If you do not, the chances of the Avengers holding their own against three strong magic-users will be greatly lessened. It benefits you, as well, to help them."

Loki clenched his jaw. Then he took a deep breath. "It is always the same with you, Thor. You and your friends mocked me unceasingly for my study of the 'womanly art' of magic, and yet it was always to me you turned when you got in over your fool heads. You always *demand*ed that I use my magic to help you. You only have use for it, you only see its *value* when you have some need. I spent my entire childhood doing as you commanded, Thor Odinson. Those days are *long* past."

The two once-brothers glared at each other, Loki cursing Thor's slight height and larger build, Thor cursing Loki's stubborn pride.

It was the captain who broke the tense silence by clearing his throat. "We definitely need to work together," he said lightly, "not do their job for them and kill each other."

The glaring continued a few moments longer. Thor relented first. He had far less anger smoldering in his heart.

"You're right. Loki, I cannot make you help them, but I am asking all the same. Any advantage you might give us can only prove useful in the long run."

Loki swallowed a venomous retort. *This was a mistake. I never should have asked Thor for help. I would have been better off on my own. I've always been alone, and I've always found a way.* He suffered them flanking him again in silence. For now, it had to be this way.

But not forever.

Fifth Installment

Fifth Installment: The Things Left Unsaid

It took Thor a little while, but eventually the realization dawned on him. This was not a dream. He was walking the dreamscape. The dark sky high overhead looked familiar, and he frowned. It looked like Æsa's prison with no walls. The ground below him looked cracked and burned, and in the distance he could see the blackened branches of a dead tree. Curious, he approached it.

As he neared, the sky abruptly lightened. Grass spread underfoot, and the tree burst into bloom. And there, standing beneath it, a winsome maiden with long azure hair. She smiled.

"Thor Odinson. I'm pleased you came. I would speak with you."

Thor blinked. The witch. She looked different. "Æsa," he said carefully.

"Mm. Cleverer than I thought," she said, her tone teasing. "Yes, this was my true form long, long ago. When I was still a girl."

Shifting his weight, Thor folded his arms. "What could you and I possibly have to say to each other?"

"I'm sure you have nothing to say," she said, voice still light, "so I will do all the talking. In short, I wish to make a bargain with you, Prince."

Thor raised an eyebrow, startled. "A bargain."

"Yes."

"You have nothing I want, and I'm quite certain I have nothing you want."

She laughed softly. It was a golden sound. "On the contrary. You have exactly the only thing I want. Loki."

It was Thor's turn to laugh, sharp and mirthless. "I will not bargain with you for Loki."

"Hear me out, please," she said, raising a slim hand. "You are protecting a demon, Thor. If you give him to me, you will be doing yourself and Midgard a tremendous favor."

"What in the Nine do you speak of, witch?" Thor growled, curiosity melting into anger.

She spread her hands, disarming. "Please, Prince. Do not lash out at me for speaking the truth. Loki told you he hid the Aether somewhere no one would ever find it, yes? But did he tell you *how* he hid it? How he found a place that no one else can find?"

Thor paused, anger boiling down to a simmer. Not a question he'd thought to ask. "What do you mean?"

She now clasped her hands at her waist. "Ask him. Ask him how he obtained the knowledge to hide the Aether so well. It required much research. Ask him how he hunted down all who possessed pieces of the knowledge he sought. Ask him how he ripped that knowledge from them so no one would ever question them about it. Ask him why he made a bargain with Hel that resulted in Surtr becoming a fast enemy. Ask him these things, Prince."

Thor's mind spun. "How do you know all this?" he demanded.

Æsa lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I have been tracing Loki's movements for the last several months. I discovered the trail of broken people he left behind him."

For long moments, Thor gazed at her in silence. She had reasons to both lie to him and tell him the truth. But which would benefit her more? Dark gray clouds began coalescing in the dream-sky. He was no fool. Whether her words were truth or lies, her objective could simply be to plant doubts in Thor's mind.

Plant them deeply with strong roots. Thor didn't want to doubt his brother, but Loki had given him so, so many reasons to do so. Thunder rumbled.

"I will make no bargains with you, witch," he said at length.

"I know what Loki gave Hel," Æsa said. "As a gesture of good faith, I'll tell you. He gave her the Casket of Eternal Flames. Surtr's most treasured possession. Do you not think if anything could cause him to go to war, it would be that?"

Thor rounded on her. "And how do you know all this? Do not expect me to believe Loki was more forthcoming with you than with me."

She smiled. "I spoke with Hel."

This time, Thor turned away. *Loki went and spoke with the ruler of Helheim. Why? What possible reason could he have?* He knew his brother wouldn't say. Though Loki's attitude toward him was more mellow these days, he could still sense an undercurrent of anger. Or something a little milder, maybe. Resentment. Whatever it might be, Thor was aware of it.

Loki would not allow Thor back into his confidence. And it seemed no matter what he did, he could not earn his brother's forgiveness. Everything he said was wrong and only riled Loki to anger. For the first time in his life he actually wished for Loki's quick thinking.

If our roles were reversed, Loki would know exactly what to do. And that thought pained him beyond measure.

"I have nothing to say to you, witch," he said, dismissing her. He knew, thanks to Loki, how to exit the dreamscape. He prepared to do so.

She appeared right in his path, a stiff breeze stirring azure hair off her slender shoulders. He almost thought her lovely, but her eyes were cold beyond measure. "Do not dismiss me, Prince," she said. "Loki will turn on you. Spare yourself and your human friends the agony and give him to me before it happens."

Thor didn't stop walking, grasping her shoulders and squeezing. "Never. Do not appear before me again, witch." He didn't stop squeezing until she cried out and vanished in an amber-orange haze.

Thor's eyes snapped open. His chest heaved as though from some great exertion. Perspiration made his tee-shirt cling to his torso as he sat up, raking fingers through his hair. It'd gotten a bit unruly of late. Perhaps he ought to trim it back. He closed his eyes.

"Ask him how he ripped that knowledge from them so no one would ever question them about it."

Would Loki do such a thing? Was he capable of it?

Clenching his fingers into tight fists, Thor surged to his feet and started pacing. He felt like a caged animal. The witch's words burned in his ears like acid, and he could not block them out. He had to know the truth. And he knew he wouldn't get it from Loki. That meant he would have to hunt it down himself.

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"How was your outing yesterday?"

Steve Rogers looked up from his *Popular Science* magazine (Tony called it his homework). Natasha Romanova sat opposite him. "I'm surprised to see you," he said, marking his page. "I thought you and Clint wanted to stay away."

"Clint does," she said. "I can't. I'm not sure why. Something's bugging me."

"Oh?" Steve encouraged.

She shrugged, tossing her red hair over one shoulder. "I can't quite put my finger on it."

He made a soft sound of amusement. "I think I know how you feel."

Sighing, she propped her elbows on her knees. "So, about yesterday?"

It was Steve's turn to sigh. "It was probably the most surreal thing I've ever done. I went out to lunch with Thor and Loki. Thor spent the whole time acting like a big brother. After a certain exchange, Loki hardly said a word. It was all just so bizarre." He let his head fall to rest in his hands. "I like certainties, Natasha. This whole situation is the exact opposite."

She snorted. "What exchange?"

Inexplicably uncomfortable, Steve straightened. It almost felt wrong to repeat it. He suspected Loki hadn't meant to say all that, he'd blurted it out in a moment of emotional instability. The Loki he knew would never intentionally make himself vulnerable.

"He said Thor used to mock his magic," he said at length. "I've always thought Thor didn't have a mean bone in his body, but he didn't deny it."

Natasha frowned, but it looked thoughtful. "Do you feel sorry for him?"

"For Loki? No," Steve said emphatically. "I just . . . empathize a little."

The redheaded assassin studied his face. "You were mocked before the experiments."

The crux of the issue. A relatable Loki was . . . well, odd. "Yeah."

"You chose a completely different path from him, Steve."

Steve leaned back, waving a hand. "I'm not comparing us. I just didn't expect to ever understand his motivations. To think maybe I do, even if just a little, well. I wasn't expecting that."

Natasha's face seemed to close off, her focus shifting inward. Steve wanted to ask what she was thinking about, but before he could, Thor strode into the room.

"Steve," he said, wearing his full Asgardian armor for the first time in a week, "I must leave for a time."

Natasha reacted first, rising to her feet. "What? You can't go, Thor. What about Loki?"

"It will take Loki another several days to recover his strength, an Earth week at least," Thor replied. "I will be back before then. Will you keep an eye on him, my friends? He will keep his bargain with me, I promise you."

"You can't guarantee that," Natasha said.

Thor shook his head. "This cannot wait. Please trust me."

"It isn't you we don't trust," she muttered.

Steve only nodded. "Just be back as soon as you can."

Thor put a large, strong hand on both their shoulders, squeezing with only a bit too much force. "Thank you. I'll be back soon."

Steve and Natasha watched as he walked out onto the balcony and summoned his hammer. He began to swing it, and after a few moments he took flight. In only a few moments more he was out of sight.

Natasha leaned to the side a little to bump her shoulder against Steve's. "Well, that happened. Something tells me it's going to be an interesting week."

Steve half smiled. Just this once, he would prefer boring.

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The sky above this meadow of purple grass was an arresting shade of jade green. Clint gazed upward in open wonder, and the sweet scent of cotton-candy drifted to his nose on the not-quite-warm breeze. Had he ever seen purple grass? He looked down, and after a moment he realized the cotton candy smell came from the gold flowers.

"My, my," came a voice sweeter than the cotton candy. "What a handsome stranger wandered into my vale. What's your name, handsome?"

The woman now before him was absolutely beautiful. Her skin was peaches-and-cream complexion, her eyes a startling shade of amber that reminded him of the flowers all around. Her hair was rich chocolate, but on the left side of her heart-shaped face was a thick streak of azure.

"Clint," he said.

She smiled, gliding toward him on bare feet. The purple grass rippled beneath her steps. "I recognize you. One of the Avengers, right? Hawkeye." Her slim hand landed on his chest, sliding up. "The handsome archer."

Clint returned her smile. "And what's your name?"

"Call me Anna," she said, sauntering closer. "You fought those horrible aliens who attacked New York, right? You're as brave as you are handsome."

Clint covered her hand with his. "I really can't talk about that. But yeah."

She giggled. "You don't need to be modest with me, Hawkeye." She all but purred the moniker. "You're so much braver than the others with their special powers and suits. You're a man, but you choose to fight anyway. Fight with naught but your brains and your bow. And your eyes. Your

clever, clever eyes which see everything."

He chuckled. "Are you trying to charm information out of me?"

Her laugh deepened, surprisingly low and throaty. Pleasant. Even sexy. "I don't want information, Clint. I just wanted to meet the hero who isn't afraid to face pure evil head on. Because that's exactly what you did, isn't it? You looked evil in the eye and didn't turn away. Even after what it did to you."

He raised an eyebrow. "And what would you know about that?"

Her hand rubbed a slow circle across his collar bone and sternum. "Everything. That beast, that evil beast who called himself a god tore your mind from your body and rewrote your will. He made you do terrible things that made your heart scream out in protest."

Clint closed his eyes. The memory still haunted him.

Her hand was warm and soothing. "There is nothing worse than robbing a man of his will," she went on, almost hypnotic. "He did that to you. It's completely understandable that you hold a special hatred for him. I wouldn't blame you at all if you wanted to see him suffer a bit. To make him pay. *He deserves it.*"

The soft words slithered over his ear, sending a tingle down his spine. Yes. Yes, he deserved it. Around and around those words reverberated in Clint's skull. *He deserves it.*

"He's a monster. You would like to see him pay, wouldn't you, Clint? That monster. *Loki.*"

Clint's eyes opened to meet hers, and he was drowning in amber. "Yeah. A monster."

"It would be easy," she whispered, and her cool breath fanned over his lips. "Would you like me to make it happen, Hawkeye? Would you like me to make him suffer? I won't kill him. You're not that sort of person. But I can make him pay without killing him. What do you say? Does that appeal to you? Hmm?"

A strangled sort of laugh escaped Clint. "Can't say it doesn't," he murmured.

She laughed again. "I know. Oh, I know. Tell me, Hawkeye. Just tell me you want me to do it, and I will."

"Yeah," he chuckled as her lips feathered over his. "Yeah, that sounds good."

The light contact deepened just a moment. "Good, Hawkeye." A warm tongue flicked over his lips. She tasted like honey and cinnamon. "It will be easy. When you wake, there will be a small vial on your bedside table, filled with a small amount of violet liquid. Only a dozen drops, perhaps less. Take it to Stark Tower. Pour it into any liquid for Loki to drink. It will turn the color of the drink, even if it's colorless water. It will have no taste, no odor, no texture. And Loki will suffer, Hawkeye. Oh, how he will suffer."

Her lips finally properly landed on his, and the kiss turned everything white. He had a vision of himself tucking a small crystal vial into his pocket. Driving to Stark Tower. A brief and polite conversation with Steve and Natasha. Pouring the violet liquid into a glass of sparkling water. Watching with intense eyes as the ebon-haired Aesir brought it to his lips and drank.

Then the colors came back and Anna's kiss felt like honey-flavored sin.

Sixth Installment

Sixth Installment: The Art of Mischief

Tony woke slowly, feeling way too hot and heavy. Groaning, he rolled onto his back and draped an arm over his eyes. Sunlight streamed in through the window, making his bedroom feel like a fucking sauna. He felt gross and sweaty. Turning his head, he glanced at the clock. Almost eleven in the morning. Way past time to be up since Thor was gallivanting around who knew where.

He got up and shuffled to the bathroom. Usually he felt quite refreshed when he woke. For some reason, he felt like he'd gotten no sleep. Then he remembered weird, disturbing dreams chasing him all night long. *Fucking dreams. It's probably because Loki's here. Damn Norse gods dropping their trouble on me.*

He took a cooler shower than normal, still feeling too hot. That helped him feel more awake, and he dried off thoroughly before ambling to his closet and getting dressed. Finger-combing his hair, he turned to the full-length mirror.

And died.

Yes, seriously.

"WHAT THE FUCK!"

Whirling, he slammed the door open and stormed into the halls. "Jarvis, where the fuck is Loki?"

"On the top floor of the Tower, sir," Jarvis replied.

Growling like some sort of animal, Tony took the elevator to the top floor. Steve was there, a big notebook perched on his knees. Natasha was, too, doing something on a tablet. And Loki was sprawled gracefully on the couch, reading a book that looked older than dirt. So comfortable. So fucking domestic. Natasha looked up first, and her lips quirked dangerously.

"Uh, Stark? What the hell?"

Steve looked up, then. An expression suspiciously like laughter immediately blossomed on his face. "Um, your hair."

Loki didn't look up, sublimely peaceful.

Tony aimed a shaking finger at him. "You!"

"Your hair's pink," Steve said.

"Princess pink," Loki agreed blithely, turning the page in his stupidly thick and old book. "Google was helpful in researching that precise color. Such a useful tool, Google."

Natasha made some choking sound that Tony *knew* was laughter.

"Undo it!" Tony snarled, stalking toward the reclined Aesir. He didn't even want to know how Loki had learned to use the Internet or a search engine. "Right now!"

Loki finally looked up, his face all smooth as if nothing at all were wrong. "I should think you would appreciate my gift. I've heard you say the word 'princess' several times. Was my conclusion

that you fancy yourself such incorrect?"

Natasha abandoned all pretense and burst into laughter. Even Steve started chuckling. Tony wanted to punch them both. But Loki first.

"Jarvis," he said, "fire up the Mark VII. I'm going to shove my suited foot so far up your ass it punctures your black heart!"

Loki, the god-damned bastard, just smiled and went back to his book. "Let me know when you're ready to begin. I'll give you a ten second head-start."

Red swam across Tony's vision as he charged across the room and smacked the heavy book shut. He slapped his left hand on the back of the couch so his entire torso was leaning over Loki, caged between his body and the cushions.

"Undo it *right now*!"

Loki merely gazed at him. "Or what, Stark? You'll creatively threaten me again?"

Without even thinking, Tony grabbed a fistful of Loki's green sweater and yanked him up so their noses were almost touching. The material was soft. "Ya really wanna test me, princess? Huh?"

A cold, cold hand covered his. "Do not touch me, human," Loki all but whispered.

Tony gasped at the burning cold and jerked upright, shaking his hand as sparks of icy pain tingled over his fingers.

Steve was suddenly there, an arm across Tony's chest and guiding him away from Loki. "How about we not provoke him?" he murmured in Tony's ear. Then he looked down at Loki. "You did promise no funny business."

"And this is funny business," Natasha chortled, a tear streaking down her cheek. "Hilarious business, really."

"Mm, I did, didn't I?" Loki mused. "That little enchantment will wear off on its own. I'm not wasting valuable energy undoing it."

Tony started moving to grab him again, but Steve once more stopped him. "Easy. It's not like he hurt you. And pink is . . . flattering on you."

Which set Natasha off all over. "Especially with the beard and eyebrows. Is all your hair pink?"

"Some loyal friends you are!" Tony growled, wrenching away from the captain to storm to the bar. He poured himself a couple fingers of scotch. So what if it was still morning.

The elevator dinged, and Clint strolled into the room. Surprising. But he looked fairly calm and mellow. He did look over at Loki, who immediately gave him that nasty smirk. Clint ignored him and headed toward the bar.

"Thought I'd see how your scans were—whoa, Stark. The hell? Your hair—"

"Yeah, yeah, it's pink," Tony cut him off.

Clint looked meaningfully at Loki with a question in his eyes. Tony just nodded, slinging his scotch back. Barton, at least, didn't look amused. He looked almost as pissed as Tony.

"Thor leaves and the bastard thinks he can do whatever he wants," the archer muttered under his breath, grabbing a bottle of sparkling water out of the mini fridge behind the bar. Tony saw him toss the cap in the trash. Then he stalked to Natasha's side.

She seemed to have gotten her mirth under control. "I'm surprised to see you here," she commented, swiping the bottle from him and taking a drink.

Clint shrugged, taking it back and drinking some. "I figured I'd find out if there was any activity. Thor being gone makes me a little edgy."

"You and me both," Tony grumbled, trying not to think about his hair.

"So far all's quiet," Steve said.

Loki looked amused as he opened his book.

Natasha took the bottle back. "We're not exactly helpless," she said in a soothing tone. "Loki gave me and the captain a comprehensive list of the witch's abilities, including a few known weaknesses." She offered Loki the blue bottle. "He's going to work on the Mad Titan and Surtr later."

"That's something," Clint said, appearing irritated when Loki sipped the bottle's contents.

The Aesir's green eyes gazed at the bottle with what looked like surprise. "What an interesting flavor. What is this?"

"It's sparkling water," Natasha said, taking it back. "Don't have that in Asgard?"

"No," Loki replied. "The Aesir drink mead or ale. Water is for horses." He made a rude sound.

What the hell is with this comfortable atmosphere? Tony thought venomously, pouring a little more scotch.

Clint finally shifted. "Ready to go, Nat?"

She took one last drink before setting the bottle on the bar. "See you this evening, Captain," she said, giving him a wave as she followed Clint to the elevator.

Steve followed them. "I'm going to check on Dr. Banner." He gave Tony a look that clearly said, *Play nice.*

Tony waved him away.

Loki's dismissal of him was so complete it couldn't even be called ignoring. It was as if Tony wasn't even there. Taking a quiet, deep breath, Tony set his glass down way too hard and walked to the couch. He perched on the edge of one of the chairs.

"If I promise never to call you princess again, will you undo it?"

Amused green eyes lifted off the book's pages. "Is that a promise you will keep?"

The words startled a chuckle out of Tony. "Nah."

A smile curved Loki's lips as he went back to reading.

Huh. That was an actual smile. Not a smirk or something equally smug and obnoxious. Just a

smile. Tony had never seen it before. It softened Loki's features and made him look young. Younger than Tony or the captain or Natasha or Banner or Barton. And Tony had never seen it directed at Thor.

Inexplicably disarmed, Tony leaned back in his chair and studied the fallen god in silence. He was still too thin. Only time would remedy that. His long legs were hugged quite nicely by the dark blue jeans he wore, his bare feet sort of elegant like his hands. The deep V-neck of the sweater exposed Loki's collar bone, giving it the impression of being a bit too big.

His hair wasn't quite as long as when he'd been busily destroying New York, and it somehow looked softer. Inky black softly framing his pale, pale face with its features too sharp to be feminine but too narrow to be masculine like Thor's.

It took him quite a while to realize Loki was watching him just as intently. He blinked and wondered if he should feel guilty. But he didn't, so he just met those emerald eyes. Loki's countenance was relaxed.

Then it went inquisitive. "Don't you have a golden-haired paramour?" he asked.

Tony blinked. "Pepper? Wouldn't call her my paramour. I'd probably be dead or bankrupt or dead and bankrupt without her, though."

The smirk began to return. "It seems to be a recurring theme with you humans. Your women are cleverer, more intelligent, and more dangerous."

"Wha—?" Tony began, righteous anger stirring. It abated before he could even finish. "Yeah, you're probably right about that."

To his surprise, Loki laughed. It was low and quiet, little more than a gentle huff. But the genuine amusement shimmering in his eyes made him look . . . young. *Jesus, he looks a decade younger than me. It's kind of . . .*

Cute. Tony shuddered.

Loki didn't miss it. "Cold?"

"You have that effect on people," Tony snarked without thinking.

Loki didn't take offense. He just snorted. "Thor said something very similar. You needn't entertain me, Stark. And I promise I won't light your Tower on fire."

"There are *so* many other things you could do that are just as bad," Tony pointed out. "Like turn the walls into Jell-O. Or turn all my computers into cats, or—"

"Cats?" Loki interrupted, head tilted slightly in curiosity. "I wouldn't have thought there were cats in Midgard."

Blink. "Yeah, one of our most popular pets."

The curiosity seemed to grow. "You keep them as pets?"

Tony cleared his throat. "Maybe cats are more horrifying in Asgard, but yeah."

"What do they look like?"

"Well, they're these devilish little critters smaller than dogs . . . dogs in Asgard?"

"Yes," Loki said slowly, "though how similar they are to Midgardian dogs I couldn't say."

Tony waved a hand. "Cats are small. Like this." He tried to approximate their size with his hands. "And furry. And they purr and get you to lower your guard so you don't notice until their little monster claws and teeth are sinking into your wrist. Or throat."

The amusement came back. "Quite the image you paint."

"It's all true," Tony insisted. "In fact, I can't believe you don't have at least twenty of them. You seem like a cat person."

"Oh? I strike you as the sort who likes small, furry, murderous creatures?"

His tone was teasing. Teasing. Tony's head started to spin. He was having a pleasant conversation with Loki. And frankly, he was enjoying it.

"If you were an animal," Tony confirmed, "you would be a cat."

Loki laughed that soft laugh again. "I would like to see a picture of one."

Tony fished his phone out of his pocket. "All right. Don't let their cuteness fool you. They're mean little suckers." He found a picture of a nice black one with pale green eyes. Definitely didn't choose it because it reminded him of anything. Or anyone. Or any god.

Loki accepted the device from him, and Tony couldn't help but notice a little too much how those cold fingers touched his for a second. The god studied the picture in silence for several seconds before his smile came back.

"There are no animals like this in Asgard. Wildcats there are quite large and have more tails. But I can see the appeal."

Tony smirked. "That your way of saying you like kitties?"

Loki's eyes met his, glittering with mirth. "That is my way of saying I can see the appeal."

Chuckling, Tony grabbed his phone back. "So what do dogs look like in Asgard?"

"Hmm," Loki said, for all the world sounding like a content, purring cat, "they're large." He held his hand a good meter off the ground. "Usually sand-colored fur with ridges of bone protecting their eyes."

What was with this enjoyable atmosphere? Tony was seriously dropping his guard here. He gestured toward his hair. "Feel like fixing me?"

And there came the malice and mischief. "Why? As the good captain pointed out, pink is quite flattering on you. What is the idiotic human vernacular? 'You're rocking it'."

Tony burst into laughter. "Officially the weirdest thing I've ever heard come out of your mouth."

Loki seemed pleased by that. Tony couldn't figure out why. He slapped his palms on his thighs.

"I'm hungry. Think I'll make a sandwich. You want one?"

The curiosity made a reappearance. "I've never had a sandwich. What is it?"

Tony dragged the book off Loki's lap. "Never? What the heck do you eat up there?"

"Meat," Loki said dryly. "Bread. Occasionally fruit. Cheese. Dishes are rarely prepared as you do here." He swung his legs over the edge of the couch.

"Well, you're in for a treat. Sandwiches are the finest invention since—whoa, hey, you okay?" He turned to see Loki stand and sway as if dizzy.

The Aesir put a hand to his head, eyes closed and face seeming paler than before. "I . . ." was all he got out before sinking back down, his other hand gripping the couch cushion.

Tony hovered, not sure what to do and wanting to put a hand on Loki's shoulder but not quite daring. "You okay?" he said again, which struck him as stupid because he obviously *wasn't* okay, but Tony really had no idea what to do.

Loki made an indistinct gesture. "Knife," he gasped. "Bring me one."

"What? Why the hell—"

"Stark," Loki snapped.

Tony reacted without conscious thought. He grabbed a knife off the bar and trotted back to Loki's side. The god was trembling now. He took the knife from Tony clumsily, and his skin was freezing to the touch. He laid the blade to his palm and pushed down without hesitation. Tony winced.

The liquid that welled up wasn't red. It was black. Loki hissed.

Tony stared. "Is that . . . poison?"

"No," Loki spat, throwing the knife away from himself. "It's a blood toxin. Ingested."

"How?" Tony asked, feeling vaguely panicky when Loki sort of toppled down sideways and curled up on the couch as if in pain. "You haven't eaten anything, you just drank that water. But so did Natasha and Barton!"

"Neither of whom possess magic," Loki said, breaths coming in ragged pants. "Get away from me, Stark."

"I can't leave you like this," Tony protested.

Loki waved his hand. "You do not want to be near me right now. And there is nothing you can do. Leave!"

Wincing, Tony jogged across the room to the elevator. "I'll be back, Loki, so keep your ass parked right there."

The Aesir didn't reply.

Seventh Installment

Seventh Installment: The Art of Loving

Following Loki's trail wasn't easy, especially given that it was several months old. Thor found himself in a large village in Vanaheim. The Vanir greeted him with the usual hospitality they showed the crown prince of Asgard, and at the tavern he asked a barmaid if she knew the name Loki. She rather reminded him of Jane Foster, though not as fair.

Her eyes widened, seeming surprised. "Loki? Of Asgard? Yes I know of him." Then she looked confused. "But why are you asking after him? I mean no disrespect, my prince."

"He is my brother," Thor told her.

Now she paled. "Your brother? But he . . . ! He never said!"

Smiling a little, Thor raised a hand. "It's quite all right. I have many questions."

She nodded. "Then you should talk to Eilíf. She is probably still at the library."

Rising, Thor gave her a shallow bow. "Thank you, my lady. I am most grateful for your assistance."

She blushed, and it was a comely. Smiling a last time, Thor took his leave.

The library was modestly sized compared to the one in Asgard, which automatically made Thor wonder what appeal it could hold for Loki. Surely there could be no tomes of ancient mysteries here his brother had not already read. He'd taken a handful of steps inside when a Vanir with dark hair glided toward him.

She had rich, dark chestnut hair, and her eyes were a deep charcoal. For a moment, Thor entertained the notion that she was the library's appeal for his brother. With a little smirk, he discarded the notion. He could barely remember the last time Loki had expressed an interest in the physical pleasures of the flesh.

She bowed. "My prince. You honor me with your presence. Is there aught I can do for you?"

He bowed in return, though less deeply. "Lady Eilíf?" he inquired.

"Yes," she said.

"I was told you have met my brother. Loki."

Her surprise mirrored that of the barmaid's. "Loki is your brother?"

"Yes," Thor said.

She turned and walked to a chair, sinking down. "All he said was his name is Loki. I never made the connection . . ."

"Forgive me, but I am short on time," Thor said. "Would you mind telling me how you met him?"

Blinking, she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "He came here. About five months ago, I think it was? He was looking for something. I had knowledge of it, so he came to me to make a bargain."

Thor frowned. "A bargain?"

"Yes." She took a slow, deep breath as if collecting her thoughts. "He said if I could give him what he sought, he would give me what I asked in return." Eilíf smiled then, and it seemed nostalgic. "There was a terrible monster living in the caves above the village. It had been tormenting us for centuries, and none of us could defeat it. I told Loki if he would destroy it, I would give him what he sought."

"And did he?" Thor asked, curious.

She nodded. "Yes." A small laugh escaped her. "Quite quickly, in fact."

"Then your bargain was completed?" he asked. "You gave him what he sought?"

"Of course."

"I'm sorry, Lady Eilíf, but I must know what that was."

Her mouth opened, but it closed after a second without a sound. "I'm sorry, my prince. I don't remember."

It felt like the bottom dropped out of Thor's stomach. Anger stirred. "So it's true. He did rip the memories from you."

Eilíf's eyes widened, and she immediately stood. Her hands shook as she clasped them to her breast. "Oh, no. No, that is not true at all. Loki *saved* us. He told me he would be taking the memories. I *welcomed* it."

Thor frowned, thrown off-balance. "What do you mean?"

Eilíf turned and began walking among the rows of books, occasionally touching a leather-bound cover. "There was a tome here. I do not remember what it was, the author, or the content. But I do remember it had terrible secrets within. That tome was entrusted to me by the author, that much I know. It was the only copy ever written. And it was that tome which drew the monster here. When Loki came, he destroyed that creature and took with him the only thing that would attract others. He *saved* us, my prince. He took a terrible burden from this village, from me."

Now confused, Thor glanced about. "How do you remember this if he took your memory?"

She shook her head. "I don't really know what he did, but he told me since I was the originator of the memory, I wouldn't forget what he had done. Only the knowledge he took. No one in this village even remembers we were plagued by that monster for so long. Everywhere I look there are smiles and laughter where once there had been none. I know he had his own reasons for helping us, but Loki saved us. I will never forget that. I will never forget him. Nor will I ever stop loving him for what he did."

Thor gazed at her, feeling something peculiar tighten his chest. She looked so earnest, so sincere. She so desperately wanted him to hear her words and be swayed by them.

And Thor was swayed. He couldn't even remember the last time someone had spoken of Loki with such reverence and devotion. No scorn, no suspicion, nothing mocking or pitying in the eyes or voice. She meant what she said.

Reaching out with a hand that actually trembled the slightest bit, Thor took her hand and bowed over it, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "Thank you, Lady Eilíf."

He is still in there. My brother still lives inside that shell of anger and resentment. If he was the monster he believed, this Vanir woman would not be standing here expressing such tender feelings. No one can love a monster.

Thor was almost moved to tears.

Eilíf smiled, and there were tears in her eyes.

oOo

Thor's searching took him next to Alfheim. The village Loki had visited here was smaller than the one in Vanaheim, even poorer. But the people wore happy smiles and greeted him with the reverence to which he'd grown accustomed. However, when he asked them about Loki he was given blank looks. At a loss, he decided to find a library.

He found only one in the village's only school, and it could barely be called a library. A woman in plain clothing met him, curtsying. "My prince. Is there aught I can help you find?"

"Do you know of my brother?" he inquired. "Loki? I am certain he stayed here a time."

Her silvery-blue eyes grew wary. "I will help you if I can," she said slowly, "for Loki did stay here. Only for a few days. I gave him shelter."

"He would have been seeking something," Thor prodded.

She turned from him, sitting down and gesturing he do the same. "Yes, he was."

Deciding her hesitance was due to discomfort, Thor offered her his hand. "Please tell me, Lady . . . ?"

"Randvé," she said, placing her hand in his. She seemed to come to a decision. "I cannot give you the information you seek. Loki took it with him when he left here."

"He erased your memories?" Thor asked carefully.

"No," she said, removing her hand a little too quickly. "He took them with him." Rising to her feet, Randvé started pacing. "Don't you dare think ill of him, my prince." Her voice hovered between anger and a desire not to be disrespectful. "You have no idea what it was like for me."

Startled, Thor leaned back to watch her more fully. "What do you mean?"

"I . . . I had a single magic gift," she said. "A curse. Something only I could do. Loki somehow learned of it and sought me out. He asked me to teach him. When I said he could not learn, he only smiled. He said if I taught him, he would give me what I asked in return." She whirled to face him. "I told him if he could learn, he could have my gift. And he is far cleverer than I ever dreamed. Not only did he learn, but he took the memory of it."

Her gaze clouded, growing distant. "That thing, whatever it was, had made me hated and feared in this village. But when he took my memory of it, everyone else's memory of it went too. Suddenly, I had a home again. A place here. He . . . he gave me my *life* back. So please. Don't you *dare* think ill of him!" Her voice shook.

Thor rose and gently clasped her shoulders. "Thank you," he whispered, feeling emotion thick in his throat.

As he went back outside and looked up, thoughts swirled in his head. *I don't know how Loki did it, but somehow he took memories from these people. But apparently he did so with their consent. His actions improved their lives. They . . . they love him.*

"Heimdall!" he called, and as the energy from the Bifrost enveloped him he felt tears sting his eyes.

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Thought, Loki mused to himself, was such a funny thing. His mind never stopped working, never stopped considering, never stopped calculating. Whatever the state of his body might be, his mind never gave in to it. And now it worked furiously to come up with the solution to this current crisis.

The blood toxin could only have been ingested. Neither Barton nor Natasha put anything in that bottle. I would have seen it. That is the only thing I've eaten or drunk in the amount of time the toxin needs to spread through me.

Natasha wouldn't poison him with a blood toxin. She was angry with him and didn't trust him, but she didn't hate him. Barton was another story altogether, but there was no opportunity. There was also no way he could get his hands on something not found anywhere in Midgard. The ingredients were of three different realms.

Æsa or the Mad Titan could have procured some. But how did they get it here without me noticing? I would have felt it if they came anywhere near the city. Stark's technological servant would have sounded alarms if they came into the Tower. His mind started generating all possible scenarios. A blood toxin was more Æsa's style than the Mad Titan's. And her favorite method of attack was similar to Loki's own: manipulation.

She's a master of the shadows. Her other area of expertise is the dreamscape. His eyes opened wide, and only partially in surprise. *The dreamscape. That's how she did it. She created a link between the dreamscape and reality using Barton as the medium.* The details of how weren't important right now. He gritted his teeth and felt grudgingly impressed by her cleverness.

Not even Loki had thought to protect against that. Easily remedied.

As soon as he purged the toxin. A low groan started deep in his throat. Any of the humans or even Thor could have drunk it without ever suffering. This insidious brew targeted seiðr, causing it to attack its own body. It felt like Loki's blood had been replaced with solar fire. The pain was indescribably intense, causing his vision to white out.

Dimly, he heard the elevator ding, signaling someone's arrival. He grit his teeth. *Fool humans. Did I not tell you to stay away from me right now?*

"Shit, Loki . . ." the captain's voice said.

On hands and knees, face pale and breath coming in panting gasps, Loki knew his seiðr was oozing from his pores in wisps of green flame. He felt them come near him, and through hazy eyes he saw the captain, Banner, and Stark.

"Stay . . . stay away from me," Loki ground out. "I c-can't guarantee your . . . your safety!"

"What is this?" the captain asked, kneeling by Loki's side. "What happened?"

Loki shook his head. He simply didn't have the concentration necessary to both explain and contain the toxic seiðr. But if any of these sentimental fools touched him, they would be consumed. No human was any match for the raw power flowing through his veins. In fact, any lesser sorcerer or

mage would have been consumed by his own power by now.

"Maybe we shouldn't touch him," Banner's voice said from far away. "There's a lot of radiation pouring off him right now. Similar to Gamma, but not the same. I doubt it's healthy."

Thank the Nine for small favors, the fools actually listened to him. Loki breathed a little easier, then he clenched his jaw when another ragged groan bubbled up. Green flame infected with black was pooling beneath him. He was literally bleeding seiðr. And it began to spread. Loki heard some colorful language, then in his peripheral saw the three men backing away.

"Shit, what's going on?" Stark demanded, voice almost inaudible over the roaring in Loki's ears.

Loki wanted to scream. He needed to purge the toxin, but that would require expelling seiðr. If he did that here, he would probably destroy the nearest city blocks. And keeping the toxic seiðr inside him was absolute agony. He couldn't afford to split focus and try to teleport away.

"Loki?" came Banner's voice, surprisingly gentle. "Tell me what I need to do."

In an eye-blink, a terrible solution occurred to Loki. Banner's monster form could most likely survive the seiðr purge. It would be painful for him. Nearly as painful as for Loki. But it would save this building and everyone in it.

"Ha-have to purge the toxin," he gasped, vision darkening. "Can't keep it . . . inside me. But the raw energy—"

"Will destroy everything around us," Banner finished, his quick mind catching up and sparing Loki having to explain. "Guys, you might want to leave. This isn't going to be pretty." He was already stripping off his shirt.

Loki had the absurd desire to hug the mortal. He was vaguely aware of the captain and Stark retreating to the elevator. Then Banner took a breath and grew. He was large enough to take up Loki's entire diminishing field of vision. A few ground-shaking steps and he was hemmed on all sides by the enormous green beast.

Almost sobbing from the pain, Loki turned his focus inward. He could hear Banner roaring in pain—or was that his own screaming? His seiðr poured out of him in toxic waves. He could feel huge hands on him, holding his head down as it felt like his body tried to turn itself inside out. Vomiting, he realized. Not something to which he was accustomed. Black liquid splattered on the floor below him, the wet sound oddly loud. He could smell burning, but he didn't know its cause.

And on the flood went. Until Loki was half mad with it, until Banner stopped bellowing or his voice gave out, until Loki felt like he was a breath from dying. He clung to consciousness, afraid that if he lost control he would kill this beast and everyone in the Tower.

Then his body (or mind) could take no more, and darkness descended.

Eighth Installment

Eighth Installment: The Power of Fear

"Jarvis?" Tony said, voice sounding as rattled as Steve felt.

"The radiation has decreased to safe levels," Jarvis' voice replied at once, "and both Dr. Banner and Loki are unconscious." Tony slapped the elevator button. "Sir, I recommend extreme caution."

"Screw caution," Tony growled. "Are they still alive?"

"Yes, sir—"

"Then they need us," Tony said.

Steve agreed. He didn't speak as he followed his friend to the top floor. The sight waiting for them when the doors parted made Steve feel like he'd been sucker punched. It looked like someone had set the entire room on fire. Every surface was black and burned, and in some places green flame still idly lapped at whatever object to which it yet clung. The air smelt acrid and hot, and Tony recoiled, face pale.

Steve did not. Not concerned about being burned himself, he ran across the floor. Banner and Loki were where they'd been ten minutes ago. The physicist was naked, his skin smoking and covered in soot marks but appearing unharmed. His body was sprawled overtop Loki. The Asgardian didn't appear injured either. He looked dead. His skin was gray and sallow, body curled in the fetal position. His clothing, too, had been burnt off.

Dropping to his knees, Steve felt for pulses and found two. Bruce's was stronger than Loki's, though. "C'mon, Tony," he said, hearing the other come up behind him. "We need to get them into a bed."

"And who's gonna carry Loki?" Stark said, sounding only half joking.

Steve looked around. "Two floors down. In that medical center you put in, is there a stretcher?"

"We could make one," Tony replied. "Damn it, where's Thor when you need him?" He was grumbling under his breath as he bolted for the elevator again.

Remaining where he was, Steve once more looked around the room. It looked like a war zone. Aside from the two men lying prone at his feet, the green flames slowly dying was the most disturbing part. He knew it was pure magic, not fire. Magic, which was not even supposed to exist. Steve half wished for a time when he believed that. He liked certainties. Magic was the furthest from.

Tony came back in short order with two blankets. "Didn't want to waste time looking for poles or making them," he explained.

Steve just grabbed one. "It'll work."

"Which one first?" Tony asked, helping Steve ease Bruce off Loki.

"Dr. Banner," Steve decided. "Even with the Hulk, I'm still more concerned about his fragility than Loki's."

Tony snorted. "You can say that again. How many times did we thrash Loki, and he *still* walked away with just some bumps and bruises?"

Steve smiled. "He's pretty tough for someone who doesn't look as impressive as Thor."

"Or you," Tony added, nudging Steve's arm.

The captain just grinned again. "Let's at least get Loki up on the couch."

The other man looked up with a raised eyebrow. "There ain't much left of it."

"Oh . . . right," Steve said, looking at the smoking ruin. The cushions were charred mostly to ash. He could see naked springs. "Well, scratch that. Help me get the blanket around him, at least."

After a little maneuvering, they got Loki wrapped up in the blanket and Bruce settled on the second. Steve took one end and Tony took the other, making a makeshift hammock between them. It worked just fine. They gingerly carried him to the elevator.

They made the ride in silence, but as the doors open Tony finally spoke. "What do you think happened up there? Loki said the toxin was ingested. But when? None of us would poison him."

Troubled, Steve led the way to the medical ward. "I don't know. I don't think any of his enemies could have gotten close to the Tower without alerting Loki. It doesn't really make sense."

They lifted Bruce onto a bed. "Think the Avengers should recruit a nurse or three," Tony said with a rueful chuckle.

Steve ran his eyes over Bruce's frame. "I don't think he's hurt too badly. Hopefully he can confirm that when he wakes up. Don't know how well the Hulk can withstand magic, but he's still in one piece and that's hopeful."

Tony shook his head. "Wish I could say the same for the foyer."

Reaching over, Steve lightly slugged his shoulder. "Priorities, right?"

Tony gave him an unrepentant smile. "We all deal in different ways, Cap."

Shaking his head and chuckling, Steve headed to the door. "C'mon, let's go get Loki down here."

They'd only taken a few steps when Jarvis sounded an alarm. "Sir, there are three helicopters landing on the pad upstairs. Armed SHIELD agents are already exiting."

"*What?*" Tony exclaimed, breaking into a run. "What the hell are they doing here? Jarvis, do *not* let them into the Tower!"

"Sir, my security protocols are being overridden. Agent Coulson seems to be leading them."

"God-damned SHIELD," Tony growled as he and Steve ran into the elevator and started up. "This is the last time I create firewalls weaker than I could out of respect for them!"

For once, Steve agreed. SHIELD had no reason to be here except one. Somehow, they'd learned Loki was here. At the worst possible time. Loki couldn't protect himself right now. And Steve didn't want to think about Thor's fury if he returned and found Loki taken from the Avengers, whom he'd trusted to look after his brother.

"We can't let them take Loki," he said quietly.

"You think?" Tony grunted. "Jarvis, stall those bastards with everything you've got, and get the Mark VIII ready!"

"Yes, sir," Jarvis replied. "Your suit is ready for deployment, the wrist markers are on the counter where you left them. They appear undamaged."

"Thank god," Tony muttered.

After what felt like the second longest eternity of Steve's life, the elevator doors opened. The bay windows had all been smashed in, and at least a dozen armed SHIELD agents had swarmed around the foyer. Agent Coulson was on his phone, and three men were manhandling the unconscious Loki.

Steve ignored the rest, heading for Coulson. "What's going on?" he demanded, holding himself straight and rigid.

"Yeah, I thought I made it real clear I don't like strangers barging into my Tower and touching my stuff," Tony added. "Especially armed ones. Especially SHIELD ones."

"I'll call you back in a minute," Coulson said into his phone before pocketing it. "Captain. Mr. Stark. I should be asking you that question. We detected a surge of energy strong enough to destroy several city blocks, energy of a sort we've come to associate with Asgard. I get here and find Loki, and this entire room looks like a temper-tantrum gone cataclysmically wrong. Care to explain?"

"We don't owe you any explanations," Tony snapped before Steve could speak, heading toward the bar.

Three men immediately blocked him. Their guns weren't quite pointed at him, which was something. But the warning was clear.

Steve moved forward in protest when the men around Loki locked heavy manacles around his wrists. "Stop this, Agent Coulson," he said. "Tell your men to leave and give us a chance to explain."

Coulson shook his head. "Sorry, Captain. This comes from Director Fury. We're taking the war criminal Loki into custody. Out of respect, we're not arresting all of you for harboring him. Director Fury expects you to come of your own will and explain the situation to him."

"We aren't—" Tony began.

Steve held up a hand. "I'll come." He strode to the three men now lifting Loki without regard to either his comfort or modest. "Move," he commanded. "I'll take him."

They looked to Coulson for confirmation, and the man nodded. Steve made sure the blanket was wrapped securely around Loki before sliding his hands under Loki's arms. He nodded to one of the men. "You grab his legs."

As he walked with them to the helicopters, he felt the most disturbing part of this ordeal so far was this moment. Loki hanging limp and silent between two humans, eyes closed and voicing not a single protest. It just felt wrong.

oOo

SHIELD headquarters was a building not unlike the FBI Hoover building. It had three fewer floors, but it had two basement levels devoted to studies the FBI could only dream about. Steve had been

there a handful of times after the incident in New York, but this was far and away the worst.

When the helicopters landed, there was a team of people waiting with various medical equipment. In twenty seconds they had Loki strapped to a gurney, an IV attached to both arms, an oxygen mask secured over his nose and mouth, and wheeled him somewhere out of sight. Steve tried to follow, but Coulson took his arm and led him another direction. Steve saw they took Loki down, but Coulson took the captain up.

A few minutes later, he was sitting with a pissed-off Director Nick Fury.

"I want to know what the hell you were thinking, soldier," the director snapped. "Harboring a war criminal? The worst enemy Earth has ever known? Please tell me he's brainwashed you like last time."

Leaning back, Steve closed his eyes a moment and tried to gather his fraying thoughts.

Don't think about Thor. Don't think about how furious he's going to be. "He's been with us about a week now," he said. "Thor asked us to help, and he asked us not to tell SHIELD."

"And you thought that was an option," Fury said.

"He's our friend and our strongest ally," Steve replied, voice tart. "It was our *only* option. You're the one who said we couldn't afford to alienate Asgard—"

"When they took Loki *from* here," Fury cut him off. "This is completely different. The circumstances aren't remotely the same."

Steve shook his head. "We made the right call, Director."

"Not your decision, Rogers," Fury said. "The Council is howling for blood. What am I supposed to tell them? That we can't trust the Avengers to act in the best interests of humanity?"

Anger flashed through Steve. "I resent that, Sir. Loki is not the threat you—"

"Not a threat?" Fury interrupted again. "That's not what Coulson tells me. I saw the images of that room. Is that Loki not being a threat?"

"That was an *accident*—"

"An accident that could have destroyed a chunk of the city—?"

"But it didn't!" Steve spat, finally reaching the end of his patience. "I came here to explain, so stop interrupting me and listen!"

Fury raised an eyebrow, and Steve flushed a little but refused to back down. The one-eyed man sighed. "Fair enough. All right, Captain. You now have my undivided attention."

Taking a few calming breaths, Steve began the story.

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It was nice to be back in Midgard where Thor could watch over his brother, but as the Bifrost deposited him on the roof of Stark Tower Thor couldn't help feel a bit of dread. Too strong a word, but Loki wouldn't be happy at all when he heard what Thor had to say. Not that it could be helped. He walked toward the door and stopped.

The huge windows were all shattered, broken glass lying everywhere. Eyes widening, Thor rushed inside to find every surface black and burned. The smell of it tainted the air acrid, though he could tell it wasn't as strong as it could be. There was also little heat in the room, which meant whatever had happened hadn't done so recently.

The elevator dinged and Tony ran out. "Shit am I glad you're back, buddy," the human panted, looking like he'd run a mile. "I'm really sorry. We tried to stop it."

Thor frowned, looking around. "Tried to stop what? What happened?"

Tony shook his head. "Doesn't matter. SHIELD found out Loki was here, Thor. They took him. The captain went with them, but as—"

"What?" Thor said. Calm. Low. Quiet.

Tony stopped approaching him, suddenly looking very cautious.

"I asked you to look after him," Thor said. Still calm. "You knew he was vulnerable while he recovered his magic."

"Thor . . ."

"You let SHIELD take him."

"Not exactly—"

Thor turned from him. "Your suit, Stark. You will be needing it."

The human didn't waste precious time asking questions or protesting or arguing. He simply ran. Thor stepped back out onto the space Tony called a landing pad. The sky overhead began to darken. Breathing in, he expelled it in a slow sigh. He could not afford to lose his head and rush off in a fit of pique. His own feelings aside, he couldn't blame the humans for being alarmed at Loki's presence. Perhaps concealing it wasn't the wisest thing he could have done.

As Loki would say, hindsight was ever clearer. He clenched his fists and resolved to calm down.

Tony didn't keep him waiting long. "Here, buddy, take this," he said, handing Thor a small ear bud.

Recognizing it and its function, Thor secured it in his ear. "Thank you," he said, beginning to spin Mjölfnir.

Tony led the way. He didn't speak, possibly sensing Thor's mood. But when they reached the headquarters, Thor exercised restraint and didn't knock the door out of his way. He waited until they were admitted, then followed an armed escort inside. Thor actually smiled. Loki was right about one thing.

Humans were a bit foolish.

Director Nick Fury met them in a sort of sitting room with Steve Rogers. The captain looked harried, but no worse for wear. Thor felt a spike of relief. He wouldn't have wished his friends to suffer for his own selfishness. He nodded to Steve and faced the other man.

"Director," he said, "Stark tells me you have my brother here."

"This is the second time we've imprisoned him," Fury said, adopting an expression of surprise.

"You didn't have a problem with it then."

"Loki was a war criminal then," Thor said, avoiding resting his hand on Mjölnir's handle. Its weight was tempting on his belt.

"And he's not anymore?" Fury said.

"He's an injured man who asked for my help," Thor replied—which was only sort of not true. "I brought him to the one place I knew he could recover in safety . . . and privacy." A harder emphasis on the last word.

"His crimes against Earth and humanity still stand—"

"They were not yours to punish then," Thor cut in, "and they're not now. You will release him into my custody, Director. I am asking out of respect, but I will not ask again."

Fury frowned. "Are you threatening us?"

Thor gave him a tight smile. "No. I am warning you. When I brought Loki here, my father didn't even know he was still alive. Now he does know, and he has altered Loki's punishment accordingly. If you interfere with the Allfather's justice, Loki will not be the only one punished."

"You would turn against us?" Fury demanded.

"No," Thor said, "but neither can I disobey my king."

"It's going to take a lot of convincing to people other than me," Fury said. "What's this punishment?"

Thor smirked faintly, already thinking of Loki's reaction. "Loki will be taken back to Asgard and imprisoned," he said, "or he will join the Avengers."

Ninth Installment

Ninth Installment: The Choice

"Where did you go?" Natasha asked.

Thor looked down at her. Though he'd only been gone a handful of days, he seemed different. More . . . peaceful. And honestly, she was a little surprised he wasn't breaking this building into teeny tiny pieces to retrieve his brother.

"I was visited by the witch," he told her. "She told me something I had to confirm."

"About Loki?" she hazarded.

He nodded. "Her words were lies, and I cannot help but wonder if this was her intent."

Natasha blinked and looked around the room where she and the rest of the Avengers had been ensconced while they waited for Director Fury to come back. "This? Loki being taken by SHIELD?"

He looked troubled. "Yes."

"What does she even know about SHIELD?" Natasha asked.

Thor looked at Clint. "Possibly as much as Loki. Barton, do you remember telling him anything while you under his influence?"

Clint's entire countenance went dark. "Yeah," he replied. "Whatever he wanted to know."

"Then there's the possibility that he passed that information on to Thanos who is now the witch's ally," Natasha murmured. "I really dislike that idea."

Thor nodded. "The witch said Loki had stripped memories from the people he visited while trying to hide the Aether." He folded his arms, looking pensive. "It seems to be untrue. Each person who'd had memories removed by my brother tells me they did so willingly. They *wanted* Loki to take those memories. Said he'd helped him. Even that they loved him."

Whether it was true or not, Natasha could tell the god wanted to believe it. Not that she blamed him. She understood wanting redemption better than anyone here. "You're worried he somehow charmed them or something," she said.

Thor's blue eyes met her dark brown. "Yes," he said simply.

Unable to help it, Natasha looked over to Clint. Her best friend appeared troubled and deep in thought. She recognized the expression of someone formulating an idea, so she didn't interrupt.

"I don't like this," Steve said abruptly, rising and pacing. "We made a promise to you we'd look after Loki." He looked at Thor. "I feel like we let you down."

Thor smiled. It was small but genuine. "This is not your fault, my friends. But I grow tired of waiting." He walked to the door and opened it.

Two armed guards immediately stepped in his path. Natasha felt a stab of pity. They obviously didn't know what (or rather, who) they were up against.

"I'm sorry, sir," one of them said, "but we can't let you leave this room without Director Fury's approval."

"You will step aside," Thor said, his tone mild and not exactly threatening, "and take me to where you're keeping my brother." He put a hand on his hammer, and lightning crackled around his fingers and wrist.

The man swallowed. "We can't allow—"

"I am not giving you a choice," Thor said. "I give you my word I will not attempt to free Loki. But I need to see him, and you will take me to him."

Looking sickly pale, the man nodded. "This way, sir."

Natasha slipped in beside him. The guards didn't even notice her until they were halfway down the hall. Any protest died without a voice at a calm look from Thor. Hm, maybe they did know what they were up against.

They took the pair down to the basement levels, and Natasha felt anxiety curl in her gut. It was such an unexpected sensation she almost smiled. *I'm actually worried about him. Loki. The one I thought I hated. I guess it's true what they say about the fickle nature of the human heart.* The SHIELD agents took them into an observation room with a large one-way window.

Natasha grimaced. There was a lot of monitoring and medical equipment in the room on the other side. The only bed was bolted to the floor, and the metal railing was obviously designed to hold someone strong. Loki lay on the white cot, a sheet drawn halfway up his naked chest. There were two IVs attached to his inner elbows, and plenty of wires were attached to his chest by electrodes.

"What the hell is in that line?" Natasha asked. One of the IV bags was clear, but the other was a glowing yellow-green.

"It's a sedative," one of the guards replied.

She doubted it. "And what's with the oxygen mask?"

"What have you done to him?" Thor said softly.

"Nothing, as of yet," Director Fury's voice replied.

Natasha turned to face him, giving him a nod of greeting.

Thor gave the director a glare lost between anger and murder. "If you've hurt him—"

"We haven't," the director said, rapping his knuckle against the glass. "That drug is keeping him sedated but isn't hurting him. There was some debate what to do with an Asgardian. It was decided we would err on the side of caution and keep him under."

"Why the mask?" Natasha asked. "Is that drug so strong it's interfering with his breathing?"

The look the director gave her was far from pleased, and Natasha knew she was right. Thor might not have any idea what drugs could do to a body, but poisons and toxins and substances in general were all her area of expertise. A girl learned things in her line of work.

"You do not answer," Thor said, taking a single step forward.

Fury just gazed at him. "Even if Loki decides to agree and become an Avenger, you can't guarantee

his cooperation or the safety of the rest of the Avengers. Try to see this from my perspective. You're asking me to trust our worst enemy."

"That is no longer Loki," Thor said. "There are things you do not know. I'm going in there, Fury. And you will not stop me."

A warning and a threat. Fury surprised Natasha by heeding both. After a moment, he nodded and placed his palm on a scanning panel to open the door to the cell. Thor brushed past him, radiating anger. Natasha didn't follow, watching him go to the bedside.

"Sir," she said, keeping her voice low, "this isn't about trusting Loki. It's about trusting Thor."

Fury stood at her side to watch Thor. "I wish I could believe that."

oOo

The struggle to wake was the most monumental of Loki's life. Darkness clung to him as if it had tentacles, but every time he heard Thor say his name he managed to drag himself a little closer to awareness. Eventually he pried open sticky eyelids to find himself gazing up into sky blue. He blinked. It took another effort to open his mouth.

"Thor," he croaked. His chest hurt as if a bilgesnipe had been jumping on it, his head ached viciously. And once again he felt raw from the unnatural expulsion of seiðr, but at least this time he hadn't been completely drained. Whatever toxic seiðr he hadn't purged would have been cleansed when his magic began to regenerate.

"Loki," Thor murmured, his hand squeezing Loki's. "How do you feel?"

Sluggish, Loki thought. The mask over his face reminded him altogether too much of the special gag made just for him nine months ago. His hand shook as he reached up and yanked it off. A sharp pain at his elbow made him look down to find a needle inserted into his skin. Anger instantly flared up. Filthy humans! They had *dared*—? He could feel his seiðr combatting whatever substance they'd been feeding him, and he ripped the needle out. Then the other one.

Thor, to his surprise, didn't try to stop him. In fact, he helped Loki sit up. Loki's anger increased when he saw he was also naked. It took about five seconds of focus to cleanse his blood of the substance flowing through it, and by the time he got to his feet he was fully clothed in his ceremonial armor.

"Did you really think you could keep me here against my will?" he hissed, lifting one hand toward the large window.

"Loki, stop!" Thor barked.

The window shattered outward, and Loki saw the so-called leader of SHIELD duck down with Natasha Romanova. He felt a brief pang; he had no quarrel with her. Brushing Thor's hands aside, Loki strode to the window. Glass crunched underfoot. He was just beginning to think of delightful ends for the one-eyed human when Thor planted himself in Loki's path.

"Brother, stop," he commanded. He lowered his voice to a whisper only Loki would hear. "You are not yet recovered from your ordeal." Louder, "The Director is releasing you into my custody. We will return to Stark Tower, for there is much we must discuss."

"I have nothing to say to you," Loki said, stepping sideways.

Thor matched his movement. "Then I will do all the talking," he answered, "but you will come with me. You will not retaliate against SHIELD, and it appears you truly weren't harmed."

He sounded rueful. Loki considered turning against him first. Two things convinced him to hold back. First, he was going to have to undergo regenerating his magic. Again. Second, he still needed Thor's help in defeating the damn shadow witch and her two equally damned friends. And he had no weapons except his hands. Under normal circumstances, it would be enough.

But while still suffering the effects of the blood toxin, it wasn't. Practically shaking with suppressed rage, Loki relaxed his posture and nodded once. "Very well, Thor."

Natasha was suddenly by his side, and Loki once again felt grudging admiration for her skills. She hadn't disturbed a single piece of broken glass. "Stark and the captain will be glad you aren't hurt," she said. "And Dr. Banner's okay, too. He's in the Tower with Pepper."

Loki looked down at her, wanting to feel nothing at her news but unable to help feeling a sliver of relief. The physicist had helped at great personal risk. Then he crushed the sentiment. *He helped because if he didn't, I would have destroyed the whole Tower and everyone in it.*

"Come, brother," Thor said, putting an unwanted arm around Loki's shoulders. He looked at the one-eyed man. "Director, we'll contact you soon."

Loki didn't look at Fury as Thor guided him out. He was certain if he did, he would rip the man's other eye out of its socket and feed it to him.

oOo

When the small group reached the roof of the building, there was a SHIELD jet-chopper waiting for them. With Natasha in front and Thor behind him, Loki felt like he was back in Asgard. They ushered him inside, and Loki sank gratefully onto the bench. And then raised an eyebrow when he saw Agent Coulson sitting right across from him.

"Hello again," the human said with a smile.

A rather smug one, in fact. Loki returned it. "Seems we both escaped our last encounter rather unscathed."

"Hardly," Coulson said. "You got up and walked away. I had to be . . . repaired."

Shaking his head and leaning back, Loki closed his eyes. "You humans are astonishingly difficult to kill. I shall have to remember that."

"Planning to kill some more soon?" Coulson inquired.

Natasha sat so close to Loki her left leg pressed against his right. "Leave him alone," she said in an even voice. "He's been through a lot."

"So I've heard," the human male said. "Director Fury wants the whole story."

A bit surprised to hear the woman defending him, Loki let Thor take over. His idiot brother may know only what little Loki had told him, but he would get the gist across. His deep voice filled the cabin all the way back to Stark Tower, and by the time they landed Coulson looked less unenlightened than before.

"Thanks," he said as they got off the jet. "I'll fill Director Fury in. You'll be hearing from us."

"I'm sure we're all looking forward to that," Loki scorned, walking toward the Tower.

As he neared the foyer, he winced at the taint in the air. His seiðr was still lingering, and his body ached with the need to reclaim it.

Well, no time like the present.

Natasha and Thor walked in behind him, but Loki ignored them and spread his hands, palms up. Immediately, the surfaces to which the magic still clung lit up pale green.

"What the-?" Natasha gasped, backing away.

Like fine green mist, the energy lifted off the destroyed objects and began trailing toward Loki. He lowered his hands and focused on breathing. This was the strangest way of eating magic he'd ever experienced, but wasting energy while in this depleted state surely classified as criminal. He could feel Thor and the woman watching as he slowly inhaled the seiðr. It felt both cold and hot as it spread through him, soothing the raw places.

"Better," he murmured when he was done.

"Natasha, I need to speak with Loki alone," Thor said.

Natasha nodded and took her leave. Irritated, Loki looked around for a place to sit and found no surviving pieces of furniture. So he hopped up onto the bar counter.

"What do you want, Thor?"

"The witch came to me in the dreamscape," Thor said. "She told me how you hid the Aether. Well, a version of it."

Loki looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "Did she. Please tell me you possess the wit not to trust a word she says."

"No more than I trust a word you say."

A surprisingly acerbic barb. Loki actually smiled. "Go on."

"I had to verify her words for myself," Thor said. "Perhaps that is what she wanted. I know not. But I traveled to Vanaheim and Alfheim, brother. I spoke with Eilíf and Randvé and others. I need to know what you did. How you took their memories with their consent."

Even more irritated, Loki merely looked at him.

Thor crossed the distance between them in an eyeblink. "Answer me, Loki."

Really, there was no benefit to lying or withholding the truth. There wasn't much in answering, either, but Loki knew Thor wouldn't let this go. He'd set his mind to it, and trying to change Thor's mind was like trying to stop a thunderstorm. Impossible.

So he sighed and yielded. "It's called a memory thread. Strands of memories linked to a specific thing or experience. When I remove a memory thread, all memories linked to the thread vanish. Let us say you do something, and Tony Stark is impacted by it. If I remove the memory thread from you, Stark also forgets it happened, because the memory thread is gone. It is far more complicated and difficult than simply erasing a memory. Erased memories can be restored. Removed ones cannot.

"When I remove a memory thread," Loki continued, "now I am the only one who possesses the memory and all the knowledge associated with it."

Thor looked a bit overwhelmed. "Where did you learn such a skill, Loki?"

Loki wanted to punch him in his stupidly square jaw. "A long time ago, Thor. I uncovered it in one of Mother's books. It hopelessly intrigued me, and I learned it. In fact . . ." He smiled. It was a cruel, cold smile. "You asked me to use it on you once."

"*What!*"

"Oh yes. You have no memory of it, because I took the memory from you. But do you recall a certain encounter with the Lady Sif and one of her Valkyrie friends? Think hard. You should have a memory fragment of coming to me and asking me to remove the thread."

By the horror that crossed Thor's face, he remembered. They were close enough he could slam his hands on the counter on either side of Loki's legs.

"You had no right-!"

Loki slapped him across the mouth. Not hard, just with enough force to get his attention. "I'm only going to say this once. Memory threads cannot be removed without consent. The process takes a long time, a great deal of concentration, and no small amount of skill. For my purposes, it was desirable so the memories in question could not be restored by those who pursued me. I am quite literally the only person alive who knows where I hid the Aether. And not even I fully know."

Thor looked disgruntled by the blow, but those last words brought curiosity to his blue eyes. "What do you mean?"

Loki smiled and tapped his temple. "I removed one of my own memory threads. It is stored in a safe place."

His bro - no, Thor - looked flummoxed. "You made yourself forget?"

"In a manner of speaking," Loki confirmed. "I am quite serious when I say I do not want the Aether to fall into the hands of our enemies."

Thor suddenly looked pleased, and Loki nearly rolled his eyes. *Of course. I said, 'our', not 'my'. Oh Thor, you truly are the greatest fool in all the Nine.*

"I spoke with them," Thor changed the subject. "Those whose memories you took. They were grateful. Every single one of them told me how you had helped them. Often at great personal risk."

This time, Loki did roll his eyes. "An unintended consequence. I didn't seek them out to help them. It simply benefited me to do so."

Thor, who still hadn't moved back as would have been polite, leaned even closer. It forced Loki to lean back so their noses didn't touch. "But help them you did, brother. You didn't have to. I've seen you bind a man's will to your own. Don't tell me you couldn't have done that and forced them to consent to having these threads removed."

Loki barely managed to contain his grimace. "You are seeking intentions where none exist, Thor. And if you don't move away from me, I will turn your undergarments into millions of tiny biting insects."

Not only did Thor not move, but the soft smile on his face didn't lessen an iota. Loki watched, feeling in a trance, as a large hand reached over and tightly gripped the back of his neck. It hurt. Then he enfolded Loki in a tight embrace.

"Say what you will, brother. But those people I met were not remembering a monster. They remembered a man and held him in their hearts with tenderness."

Loki felt like he would break, but exactly which part he could not say. He hissed in a pained breath and practically flailed in Thor's grasp. He managed to shove the fool back enough to find the space to escape. He stopped several paces from Thor, trying not to breathe like he'd run twenty leagues.

"Don't attach your fool sentiment to my actions, Thor," he snapped. "You cannot simply wish something into existence."

"Whatever you think, Loki," Thor said in aggravatingly peaceful tones, "my brother is still in there."

With an inarticulate growl, Loki paced away from him. "You said you had something to tell me. I think I've humored you enough for one day." *For one millennium.* "How exactly did you get to Vanaheim and Alfheim? Please tell me you were not fool enough to use the Bifrost."

"I had to," Thor said as if it were obvious.

Loki slowly turned back to him. "And how did you explain your *gallivanting* to the Allfather?"

"You know I cannot lie to him, Loki," Thor replied, infuriatingly calm.

The wheels started turning. "Tell me you did not . . ." Loki whispered.

"Yes. I had to tell him the truth."

The bottom dropped out of Loki's stomach, his heart started to pound, and he backed away before he could stop himself. "You - "

"Loki, have no fear. I told him of your actions in these last nine months," Thor said, his voice suggesting this changed everything. "He was moved by what you were trying to do, and he has passed a new sentence."

"Wonderful," Loki spat. "Because your bargain with me meant nothing to you, clearly."

"I had no choice, brother. He is still my king and our father. He will not have me bring you back to serve out the remainder of your prison sentence. Instead, you will join the Avengers and help them protect Midgard from its enemies."

For the first time in his life, Loki was stunned into total silence. He couldn't move, couldn't think. He just stared at Thor, neither caring nor even noticing he looked like a gaping fish. Thor smiled, and Loki's mind ground into stuttering motion.

"Join . . . ? Join them . . . ?"

"Yes," Thor said. "Father still believes you need to understand the consequences of your actions, but he believes as I do, that you've suffered enough."

"How magnanimous," Loki snarled, the power of speech finally restored. "It seems you two derive great, perverse pleasure in deciding my fate for me. How could you think this is an improvement,

Thor? You truly are the biggest fool in the Nine. Do you honestly expect me to accept chumming around the world with your *human* friends? To protect *humans*? I will never accept this!"

"If you do not, then I will be forced to take you back to Asgard where you will be imprisoned again," Thor said. "This is our new bargain, Loki. Choose."

Helpless fury turned Loki's vision red. There was nothing he could do. Thor had backed him into a corner. He didn't realize he was biting his lip until he felt something hot and wet streak down his jaw. His hands clenched into fists, nails digging into his palms.

"Well, brother?" Thor prompted. His voice wasn't self-satisfied or triumphant. It was gentle. "What is your decision? Do we have a bargain?" He held out a hand.

If he gave his word, if he agreed to this ridiculous deal, he would be bound by it. After another few moments of blinding rage, Loki unclenched his fists and relaxed his shoulders. He slapped his palm against Thor's, digging his fingernails into Thor's wrist.

"Yes, Thor Odinson. We have a bargain."

Tenth Installment

Tenth Installment: A New Perspective

The day Thor brought Loki back to Stark Tower, Loki erected a new ward around his room and slept the rest of the day and most of the next. By evening he decided this behavior was too close to pouting and let the ward go. He didn't leave his room, not particularly interested in eating or interacting with anyone. He didn't care to hear what the rest of the Avengers thought of his teaming up with them.

They'd be as bloody thrilled as he was.

Lying on the huge bed in his room, Loki closed his eyes and thought about nothing. It was a peculiar feeling, thinking about nothing. His mind was normally a tangled labyrinth, pathways of unrelated thought all interconnecting. But all the movement had stopped. Normally, that would bother him. Just this once, it didn't. It was a relief.

He was glad Thor hadn't bothered him. He'd recovered a fair bit of magic in a day thanks to eating it, but he would need to go outside for a few hours to finish. He was far from helpless, and he wouldn't be tricked by the witch or taken by SHIELD again. And the price, it seemed, was . . .

To become an Avenger.

To coin a vulgar human phrase, he was fucked.

"Damn it all to the Nine," he muttered, laughing. It was mirthless, rueful.

A knock on his door actually managed to startle him. *Apparently thinking about nothing lowers one's guard*, he mused. His visitor didn't have the courtesy to wait for an invitation to enter before opening the door and walking in. Loki was surprised to see Clint Barton cross the threshold. The human closed the door behind him and didn't advance further.

Loki didn't bother to sit up. "As uninvited guests go, you're the last I expected."

The man didn't look happy one bit. "Trust me, I don't want to be here any more than you want me here."

Loki smiled. "On the contrary, Hawkeye. I'm intrigued." He folded his hands behind his head, lazy and indolent. "Tell me why you've come."

For several moments, nothing. Then Barton stirred. "Thor said you could do something called remove memory threads. Is that true?"

"Yes," Loki said, wondering at Thor's motives for disclosing that.

"What happened to you . . ." Barton said, looking uncomfortable, "up there. It was my fault, wasn't it?"

Loki closed his eyes with a faint smile. "More or less. It would be more accurate to say you were simply the one who allowed it to happen. The witch used you to get to me from the dreamscape."

"The dreamscape?"

"Yes," Loki said. "It's best described as a place between places. Normally humans only skim the surface when they sleep. The witch must have dragged you down into it, otherwise you never could have interacted with her in any meaningful way."

"So . . . that dream woman was the shadow witch?"

Smirking, Loki resisted the urge to say something too disparaging. "I didn't actually see your dream, Hawkeye. How would I know?"

Barton looked down, his expression lost between chagrin and shame. "She said . . . she asked if I wanted to see you suffer."

"Ah," Loki mused. "Yes, I'm certain that was her. Though my suffering wasn't her goal. I don't know the specifics of your dream, but I believe what happened was she used your desire for revenge to convince you to let her punish me. Is that correct?"

He only nodded.

"What she did was *persuade* you to let her," Loki said. "When you said it was what you wanted, you formed a path between the dreamscape and reality, which allowed her to poison me."

"Persuaded me," Barton repeated, finally looking up. "You like making deals, right?"

"I'm rather known for it," Loki confirmed.

"Then I want you to ensure no one can ever *persuade* me again, not even you."

Loki slowly sat up. "And what do I get out of this bargain?"

"A memory thread," Clint said. "The one where you used that scepter to erase my free will."

Loki blinked. It took a split second to see the benefit to him. Removing that thread would remove the greatest source of animosity Barton felt toward the god. Attacking New York wasn't personal, Barton could move past that like the rest of the Avengers.

"Do you understand what you're asking?" he inquired. "By removing that memory thread, you won't even remember that I *can* do it."

"So you benefit from it," Barton said, now looking impatient. "You enchant me, I stop hating you. Seems like a fair deal, right?"

A smile spread across Loki's lips. "We have a bargain, Hawkeye. It isn't easy removing a memory thread, though. It takes me at least an hour, and I'm not fully recovered from our last ordeal. I'll need to rest, and I'll require you to tell Thor and the others that I'll be more vulnerable for a time."

"Fine," Barton said, striding forward. "What do I need to do?"

Loki patted the bed. "Sit. In order for me to easily find the thread, you'll need to hold the memory firmly in your thoughts. But first, a little enchantment to make sure no one can ever overwrite your will again."

Barton didn't move. "How will I know if it works?"

Loki shrugged. He'd always hated the gesture, it was lazy and sloppy. But right now he was tired. "You won't. Not until someone tries to do it to you again."

Barton's jaw worked for several moments. "But you always keep your end of a bargain?"

"Yes," Loki said, waiting for the human to make up his mind or gather his nerve. Whichever came first.

He didn't wait long. "Fine," Barton said, crossing the room and sitting on the edge of the bed. "Enchantment first, then memory thread."

Loki smiled. "Of course. This is your bargain. You're in control here."

He could tell Barton liked that. It seemed to help him relax, and he nodded. "Go on then."

"All right," Loki said, holding up his hand and coalescing a stream of energy. Green. Such a soothing color. "You'll feel a warmth. It may hurt a little, but not for long."

Barton didn't look comforted or thrilled as Loki scooted closer and reached toward him with his glowing hand. Loki focused only on the spell. It would be one of the strangest he'd ever woven, to protect Barton against even his own magic. Or at least, one specific facet of it. And even though Barton hadn't asked, Loki decided to make sure this spell couldn't be removed by anyone, either. Himself included.

It came in steps. First, weaving threads of magic together like a tapestry so the spell would be strong. Then infusing each thread with intention. *Well, something like that.* Loki smiled to himself as the spell came together. He could see the discomfort on Barton's face, but as he'd promised it didn't last long. Loki wove the threads into each other and sealed them.

"I'm done," he said, lowering his hand. "How do you feel?"

Barton put a hand to his chest. "More or less the same," he said.

Loki snorted. "Are you ready for the rest?"

"Get on with it," the human said.

"Hold the memory in your mind," Loki said again. "Once I've found it, you'll feel a pulling sensation. It won't hurt."

The man just nodded, and Loki reached up with both hands this time. He placed them alongside Barton's head and took a deep breath. Honestly, removing memory threads was one of the most difficult, delicate spells he had ever learned to cast. It truly would be so much easier to just erase the memory. No matter. The benefits to removing the thread were greater. His lips quirked in a tiny grin.

Perhaps you should have asked Thor for details before asking me to remove a memory thread, fool human. You aren't the only one who will forget what I did to you. All your Avengers will forget, including Thor. You will not remember what I did, you will not remember that I can. And who knew when that little tidbit would be useful.

Knowledge was always power.

oOo

Tony surveyed the top floor of his Tower. It looked quite a bit better than two days ago, most of the ash and soot cleaned up. All the damaged furniture was gone, and a few pieces had been replaced. The part that pissed him off the most was that every single expensive, rare, and perfectly-

aged bottle of scotch, wine, brandy, and whiskey in his bar was gone. Destroyed by magic.

Three words he couldn't have ever imagined putting together.

"It's looking better up here," Banner said, striding across the floor.

Tony folded his arms and leaned against the bar. "Some things can't be replaced with all my money."

Banner gave him a crooked smile. "Yeah, sorry about that."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "*You're* sorry? Don't sweat it, buddy. Thanks to you I still have a Tower. And my life. How're you doing?"

"Fine," Banner said. "I think Loki got the worst of it."

"Bastard's still standing," Tony said. "Still . . . guess I owe him a thank you, too. He really didn't want to destroy everything. That deserves a thank you, right?"

"Yeah, you should get him a fruit basket," Banner said. "Just curious, are we going to continue our research, or are we going to give it up out of respect for our new teammate?"

Tony snorted. "Yeah . . . how about that, huh? Loki. An Avenger. Loki joining the Avengers. Bad guys joining the good guys to fight badder guys. Seriously, could my life be any weirder?"

Banner laughed softly. "Does it beat the day Thor first showed up?"

"Hm. Maybe. Yeah, probably."

The elevator dinged. Steve walked out with Natasha, Thor, and Director Fury. Tony rolled his eyes.

"Great. Didn't I mention this is a SHIELD-Free Zone?"

Banner patted his shoulder.

"All right, people," Fury said, looking a bit resigned, "the Council have agreed to Loki joining the Avengers on a trial basis. Basically, we're going to see how this goes. Where the hell is Barton?"

"Dunno," Tony said, looking around (rather pointlessly, since he already knew Barton wasn't in the lounge). "Here, somewhere. Where the hell is Barton?"

"He is with Loki, sir," Jarvis piped up helpfully. "There seems to be magic-use in process."

"What!" Tony yelped. He barreled to the elevator, everyone else hot on his heels. He held up a hand. "Maybe you all should wait up here?"

"I will come," Thor said, his tone brooking no argument.

"Yeah, good idea," Tony said.

The elevator zipped down, and Tony looked up at Thor. "So, you really think Loki will join the Avengers?"

"He will," Thor said. "I convinced my father that Loki's punishment would be better served in making reparations rather than being locked away where his anger and hate will fester."

Tony nodded absently. "Guess it will. Jarvis, is Barton okay?"

"Yes, sir. Vitals suggest no distress."

It didn't stop either him or Thor from hurrying when the elevator stopped. They charged into the room just in time to see yet another strange scene unfolding. Barton and Loki were sitting seriously close on the bed, Barton looking almost peaceful. And Loki . . . damn Norse gods and their weird shit. He had a silvery-blue strand of light in his hands. As Tony watched, it turned green, and Loki . . .

Ate it. He lifted it to his lips and breathed it in.

Tony blinked.

Thor reacted first. "Was that a memory thread?" he demanded.

Loki lowered his hand to give his brother a glare. "Just because I've agreed to join this idiotic band of misfits doesn't mean you can barge in here as you please."

"What are you *thinking*—" Thor began in a furious tone.

Barton got up, and in the blink of an eye he was between one god and the other. "Whoa, slow down Thor," he said. "I asked Loki for this."

Folding his arms, Tony leaned against the door frame. "Um, would you mind clarifying that a little? New house rule. No secret magical meetings or weird shit of any kind."

Loki made a rude sound. "This is none of your business. And I believe I sensed that fool director's presence." He rose to his feet, all liquid grace. "There is something we need to discuss."

Tony watched, torn between amusement and something more like horror as Thor tried to stop Loki. The smaller god vanished and reappeared a few steps away, strolling toward the elevator without missing a beat.

"Well, Stark?" he said, sounding way too self-satisfied. "Are you coming?"

Flashing Thor a sympathetic smile, Tony followed him. "So, this is gonna be different, huh? Does this mean you'll be living on Earth?"

Loki turned to him, his green eyes contemplative. "I will make myself available to the Avengers," was all he said.

Mysterious bastard. "I'm asking because if you need it, that room is yours."

Loki just smiled. "Generous of you. I won't need it."

Tony couldn't help a cocky grin. "Got something against me as a roomie?"

To his surprise, Loki laughed softly. "I think of all the Avengers, I could handle being near you the longest." The mirth evaporated. "I am not a human, Stark. I do not require human company. In fact, it will be best for us all if I avoid it."

"So you're not a social butterfly," Tony said, waving a hand. "I understand. But a guy still needs a place to sleep, even if he is some high-and-mighty Asgardian sorcerer who once tried to take over Earth but failed thanks to his new super-hero buddies."

The humor came back to Loki's eyes. "You truly have an eloquent way with words, Stark."

"I have been told now and then I've got a pretty talented tongue," Tony said. Then wondered what the hell was wrong with him.

Loki laughed again. Whether he would reply to that or not Tony would never know, because the elevator chose that second to reach its destination and open. Tony didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

The fallen god strode out of the elevator and into the lounge like he owned the place. Wearing jeans and a silvery-gray sweater, he somehow didn't look less intimidating than when wearing his armor. He went straight to the SHIELD director.

"Fury," he said. He somehow managed to make the man's name sound like a profane curse.

I'm not the only one with a talented tongue, Tony mused. Then wondered again just what the hell was wrong with him.

"Loki," Fury said. "Thor explained your options?"

"Yes," Loki replied, an arrogant tilt to his chin, "and before you attempt to assert your dominance, let me save you the trouble. I will help your Avengers protect Midgard. But I do not recognize your authority. I will not bow my head and accept orders like a good soldier."

Tony wanted to sigh. *Shoulda seen this coming.*

"You're an Avenger now," Fury said, "even if on a trial basis. That means taking orders when—"

"It means working with them when the need arises," Loki cut him off. "I am not an operative of SHIELD. I am not some human *lackey*. You may be assured of my loyalty, I will keep my bargain with Thor and the Allfather. But no one commands me."

Maybe I get along with him so well because we're kind of alike, Tony thought. *I'm just less psychotic.*

Loki and Fury engaged in the staring match of the century. Tony was impressed. Not many could glare at Fury and keep their balls intact. But he'd definitely met his match in Loki. And really, Fury didn't stand a chance.

"That isn't how things work on Earth," Fury said after a moment. "There's a chain of command."

"Then you humans keep to it," Loki said. "You were, after all, made to be ruled."

A mean, mean smile crossed his lips. Tony could tell he wasn't the only one pissed off by that statement. Steve reacted first.

"Director, I think it would be best if we worked this out amongst ourselves. Technically, Loki doesn't answer to SHIELD, and as long as he's there when we need him I don't have a problem with it."

Tony could tell he was mostly just trying to diffuse a tense situation. Fury didn't look assuaged, but Loki did. Fury seemed to recognize it was as good as he'd get. He nodded.

"Fine, but if this turns out to be a problem—"

"It won't," Loki said. "Now, I'm asking you to leave. I believe Stark expressed a wish that this be a

'SHIELD-free zone', and I agree."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Way to use me as leverage. But it's true, Director. And we kind of have a lot of work to do."

Fury looked defeated. "I expect to be kept apprised." He looked at Steve.

The captain nodded.

Tony rolled his eyes.

After he was gone, Loki faced Steve, Natasha, Bruce, and Tony. "Now that's over with, I have a request. The way you humans have turned to science in the absence of magic is fascinating, and I would like to learn more."

A horrifying thought, really. Tony held up a hand. "I'll teach you everything I know, princess."

Loki graced him with a condescending smile. "As tempting an offer as that is, Stark, you are not the one I have in mind."

Steve stirred. "We'll do our best to accommodate you."

"Good," Loki said. "Then please send for Jane Foster."

Eleventh Installment

Eleventh Installment: Expectations

There were some things a girl just never thought she'd be doing. Flying to Stark Tower to be the teacher of the worst enemy of Earth qualified. It was even weirder that this enemy was her crush's younger brother who, it happened, had saved her life. Twice. It didn't stop Jane from wanting to smack him again as she embraced the waiting Thor.

"I missed you," he murmured in her ear.

She smiled up at him. "Then you should call more often. I haven't seen you in two months."

He sighed and looked tired. "I am sorry. I could almost wish away my responsibilities."

"Don't you dare," she said. "So, where am I going to be working?"

Thor introduced her to Tony Stark, who was just as handsome and charming and arrogant as all the tabloids claimed. He kept his flirting to a minimum, and Jane wondered why until she saw Thor's glare out of the corner of her eye. She grinned to herself and enjoyed that Thor felt possessive of her.

Tony gave her a comfortable room with a couple chairs, a faux fireplace, and at least a dozen holo-screens for her lessons. There were also about a hundred fat textbooks.

"You know, in case he wants to follow along or something," Tony said.

His expression told her he was just as weirded out by the thought of teaching a god anything as she was. At least she wasn't alone.

Thor stayed by her side as Loki appeared. Jane couldn't help the automatic shiver. He was tall and slim and very attractive, but there was just something so dark about his countenance. She couldn't quite place her finger on it. She resisted the urge to slap him. His green, green eyes glittered as if daring her.

She cleared her throat and lifted her chin. "Loki."

He glided toward her, feet hardly making a sound on the soft carpet. "Miss Foster," he said, holding out a hand.

After a slight hesitation, she took it. However, he didn't shake it. Instead, he lifted it to his lips and, with a slight bow lightly kissed her knuckles. His lips were cool. To her consternation, she blushed. But really, it was such a courtly gesture. When he met her eyes, they were filled with amusement. Her blush darkened a little as she pulled her hand free.

"I have to say, I was surprised by your request," she said, going to the computers. "Where do you want to begin? I really should do some sort of comprehension test to see what you already know or your learning level, because obviously I can't just launch right in without—"

"I think you will find I am a quicker study than your average human," Loki purred. "You may begin wherever you wish. I will tell you if I need more explanation or if your explanations are too simple."

Jane made a sour face while her back was turned. *He's so arrogant.* She immediately decided to start out with some of her most difficult subject matter. Thor, who had been standing by the door watching Loki, pushed off.

"Do you need anything, Jane?" he asked in that lovely deep voice of his.

She smiled at him. "No, thanks."

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Then I will see you later." He left her alone with Loki.

Who was watching her with a tiny, knowing smile. She straightened her shoulders. "Why me?" she asked. "You probably could have gotten anyone to do this."

"Not just anyone would do," Loki replied. "You are perhaps the cleverest human I have ever met. And inexplicably, you enjoy my brother's company. I believe Stark would call this a 'win-win' situation. Do you disagree?"

"No," she admitted a tad grudgingly. "And how do you know whether I'm smart or dumb as a box of rocks?"

He laughed. It was soft and low and sort of silky. "I'm aware your research found several anomalies in Midgard that led you to destroying Malekith and banishing the Aether. When you look up, Miss Foster, you aren't just staring at a bunch of pretty lights in a velvet canvas. You are *looking*. Seeking. Positing theories and calculating their likelihood."

Jane gazed at him, appraising. "How do you know?" she demanded at length.

That same, dark smile. "I can see it in your lovely eyes. Now, have I satisfied that insatiable human curiosity? I would love to learn about this science to which you humans subscribe."

"We don't *subscribe* to it like it's some sort of superstition or religion," she said primly. "It's cold, hard fact."

"As is my magic, which just a year ago you would have dismissed as pure fantasy," he reminded her.

She gave him a rueful smile. "Okay, touché. So don't you make the same assumption. Got it?"

His smile seemed more genuine, and she was struck by how much younger it made him look. "I never make assumptions, Miss Foster. You would be a good partner for my brother, you know. He needs a woman who isn't dazzled by his status. And who is smarter than him."

Flustered, she glared at him. "Don't be so disparaging. Thor's a wonderful man. I saw him offer you his life if it would spare us. And I'll never forget that you tried to kill him."

Loki just laughed. It wasn't a mean laugh. No, it was warm and bright. "I didn't try very hard. Honestly, if he couldn't survive that little thrashing he would be a miserably pathetic king of Asgard. And you should thank me. Thor wouldn't throw his life away for just any female. You're special to him."

"If this is you trying to win me over," Jane snapped, "you suck at it."

Holding up his hands in surrender (she supposed) with one last grin, he melted gracefully down into a chair. "Then shall we begin our lessons, Miss Foster? You have my undivided attention."

Giving him a last glare, she pulled up some subject matter on the screens. "Good, because I hate repeating myself."

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After three hours, Jane was both elated and a little disappointed. Starting out hard and fast turned out not to throw Loki like she was secretly hoping. He picked up on new concepts so fast it made her head spin. It was exhilarating to teach someone so smart. But it brought whole new thoughts to her mind.

He's smart. Smarter than me. Than anyone I know. I wonder how Thor and the others defeated him. It just seems like, if he really wanted to rule Earth, he would be ruling it.

It was a sobering, frightening thought.

He called an end to their first study session. "You must be hungry?" he inquired. "There is something I need to do."

"I could use a snack," Jane said, rolling her shoulders. "Back in an hour?"

"Two," he said. "Stark and I have a few matters to discuss."

She nodded, looking forward to some alone time with Thor. "Sure. Two hours."

They went their separate ways, and Jane headed upstairs. Jarvis politely told her Thor was in the foyer. When she stepped into the room, she winced to see the remnants of the damage done. Thor was there with Natasha Romanova and Clint Barton. Thor immediately rose and went to her, embracing her.

His arms were so large, she felt completely surrounded. "Hi," she murmured when he released her.

He smiled. "Hi. How goes your first lesson with Loki?"

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, ridiculously wishing she was wearing something . . . sexier. "Really well. It won't be long until I don't have anything to teach him."

Thor chuckled, taking her hand and tucking it under his arm. "His tutors always said the same when we were children. His studies and love of knowledge always consumed his time and attention."

Jane smiled. "It's wonderful to have such an apt pupil. I don't always have people encouraging me to think outside the box, to question everything. I love it."

Those amazing blue eyes of his were filled with affection. "I am pleased for you. I had half expected my brother to give you a difficult time."

She patted his hand. "I can handle an unruly student, don't you worry. Um . . . can we go out? For lunch? If you haven't eaten, that is. If you have, that's fine. I was just thinking I was a little hungry and could really go for some coffee and—"

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed each knuckle. "A meal sounds perfect. Clint. Natasha." He nodded to them both.

Out on the streets of New York, Jane took a few moments of silence to admire Thor's profile. He was strong, masculine, big, and devastatingly handsome. Even wearing normal clothing and not his

usual chainmail armor, he still looked too beautiful and perfect to be of Earth. Maybe that was just her crush talking. But really, she'd never seen a human man *that* good-looking.

"I'm glad you aren't afraid of Loki," he said, startling her.

She let out a huff of laughter. "He makes it easy to forget I should be mad at him," she admitted. "He can be really charming. But you know Thor, I was thinking. He learns so fast. He's *so* smart it's kind of scary. I keep wondering, why isn't he the ruler of Earth? Not that I'm complaining, but I really feel like if he'd truly *wanted* it, he would have gotten it. He's got a way with words that could make you start wondering if his way isn't best after all. And if he can do that with me, why didn't he do it with everyone else?"

Thor's gaze on her was pensive. "What are you suggesting?"

She shrugged. "Just . . . I don't know. Are you sure he didn't . . . *want* to fail?"

Thor blinked. Then he looked away, and she could see anger simmering in his eyes. "If he wanted to fail and still killed so many, then his actions were all the more reprehensible."

Jane surrendered that line of thinking with a distracted nod. Maybe. But the situation bothered her, and she knew it would keep bothering her until she had an answer. *I'll ask Loki about it. Even if he won't tell me, maybe I can tell by his expression or posture or something if there's more to the story than a mad Asgardian god wreaking havoc on Earth.*

oOo

"Loki!" Stark exclaimed, looking up from his phone call. "Hey, can I call you back later, Pepper? Okay, thanks." He hung up. "You look like a man with something on his mind."

Loki gave him a slight smile. Of all the Avengers, Stark irritated him the least. "Yes. A request. Though I am proficient with any number of weapons, there is one that suits me better than all others. I would like the use of your lab to make a staff."

Stark raised an eyebrow, folding his arms. "That seems like a bad idea. I like unarmed Loki best."

Smirking, Loki took a few steps toward him. "I am never unarmed, Stark. And it seems I'm an Avenger now. You each have your own weapon of choice, yes? I am simply throwing my lot in with you."

"Somehow I doubt that," Stark muttered. "What if I say no?"

"Then I will make one elsewhere," Loki replied. "I was not asking your permission. Merely the use of your resources."

The human seemed to consider. "I guess I *am* curious. What's so special about a staff?"

Loki kept his eyes on Stark's face, mind wandering even as his mouth answered. "It serves as a focus for my magic. Makes it easier to cast spells and expend far less energy."

In the last few days, Stark had seemed almost flirty. He wondered if the human was doing it on purpose or because he couldn't help himself. Humans were slaves to their baser natures. In that, they weren't so very different from the Aesir.

"What are you smirking about?" Stark demanded.

Loki snorted softly. "Nothing that need concern you. Would you please tell Thor I'll be back in three days?"

"Whoa! Slow down there, princess. Where the hell do you think you're going?" Stark planted himself in Loki's path.

"Again, it doesn't concern you," Loki said, a clear warning in his voice.

"Like hell it doesn't. I'm not about to tell Thor I just let you waltz out of here."

"Then tell him there was no waltzing involved," Loki quipped, amused in spite of himself. "Tell him I *teleported* out. You are only human. He can find no fault with you."

"All right, you smug bastard," Stark growled, "let's talk about your *clear* superiority. I seem to recall a week ago you weren't such hot shit. I didn't go and get myself three dangerous fucking enemies and go running to big brother to bail me out."

A plethora of emotions welled up in Loki. Anger. No, rage. How *dare* this pathetic *human* . . . Chagrin. His words held more than a grain of truth. Amusement. His audacity was astounding. None of this made it to his face, and his voice was even.

"Your words are irrelevant. I will not stand here and continue this childish argument."

"You're wound up pretty tight, aren't you?"

Loki blinked. "What?"

Stark leaned closer to him. "You should loosen up a little. Come on. Call me a pathetic human who doesn't know jack shit and get mad. Throw a temper tantrum if you want. Just don't throw things. Especially me."

Loki couldn't help it. He started laughing. "You do these nonsensical things just to see what will happen, don't you?"

"Of course. I don't like boring, predictable things. I think that's why I'm not spitting mad that you're an Avenger. You may be bat-shit crazy, a total psychotic sociopath, and suffer from the galaxy's biggest superiority complex, but you keep things interesting. I'll give you that."

His tone of voice was puzzling. Again, it sounded almost flirty. In good humor, Loki turned away. "Educational as always, Stark. But I must go. Your Midgardian metals won't suffice for the staff I desire to make. For that I have to go elsewhere. Remember to tell Thor. Three days."

"Why don't *you* tell him?" Stark said, sounding for all the world like a pouting teenager.

Was this part of this 'charm' for which he was so renowned, Loki wondered. "Thor will . . . protest," he said after a moment. "Your protests mean nothing to me. Thor's protests have the power to actually stop me."

After a few seconds of looking flabbergasted, Stark began to laugh. "Gee you know how to make a person feel unimportant. My protests mean nothing, my words are irrelevant, I'm just an idiot human . . ."

Putting on his sweetest smile, Loki leaned toward him. "Perhaps if you didn't call me *princess*, I would see fit to acknowledge your opinions."

Stark's eyes were about on the same level as Loki's mouth, and Loki didn't miss how Stark's eyes suddenly focused on the god's lips.

"Maybe if you would stop acting like one," Stark retorted, finally looking back up into Loki's eyes.

Loki chuckled softly, aware that Stark had leaned a bit closer to him. "I could make you pay for your disrespect," he murmured. "Pink hair would be the very least of your concerns."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

Was the human *flirting* with him? Loki straightened with a smirk and stepped around him. "Three days, Stark." This time, he didn't wait for a reply.

It wasn't, he thought with a shake of his head, as terrible as he might have believed.

Twelfth Installment

Twelfth Installment: In the Darkness

In the darkness there is no sound, but the silence is loud. In the darkness there is nothing to see, but there are no eyes so that is fine. But she remembers seeing. She remembers eyes. She remembers fingers reaching out to touch. She remembers ears that hear music and laughter and voices. She remembers the feel of clothing and having a body. She remembers colors, she remembers the scent of perfume and flowers.

She remembers them but has them no more. So when the darkness and nothingness ripple, she is alert instantly because that can only mean one thing.

He has returned. As he promised. He has returned.

And there he is. Green eyes. Pale skin. Raven hair. Only half of his mouth quirks up in a smile. She rushes to him, around him. His smile strengthens.

"Are you ready for me?" he murmurs.

The sound of his voice is sweeter than all the music she remembers. Yes, she says. Yes, she is so ready to be free of this darkness. She is ready to go where he goes, to see what he sees, to experience all he experiences. I already love you for offering this to me. Can you do it? Can you do it? Now? Now? Now now nownownow . . .

A soft laugh. "Very soon," he promises. "I will come back for you very soon. Be ready, I have almost finished preparing your vessel. And then you will be trapped no more."

He will only take a piece, he has said. He will only take a piece of her. But he will take the piece where her awareness resides, so she need not be aware of the rest that remains in the darkness. That will be enough. She is satisfied with that. She doesn't need to be vast. She just needs to be with him, living alongside him, protecting him, for if anything happens to him she will return to the darkness and never be free of it again.

She will destroy anything that tries to harm him. That is her bargain.

"I know," he purrs, and she coils around him again. "You will be my greatest ally. And I will be your devoted servant."

I know. I know, because that is our bargain. I love you. I love you for what you've done. And you'll introduce me to her, won't you? That strange one who caused the spark? I would like to thank her. Because of her, I know you.

He smiles, and though she doesn't see it she feels it. "Of course. She is waiting where I will be. I must go, but it won't be long now. Not long at all."

She reluctantly relinquishes her hold on him. The darkness enfolds her once more, but she is smiling. Soon, the darkness will be her prison no more.

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"Stark."

It was soft. Despite the lack of volume, it was spoken forcefully enough that Tony snapped awake instantly. And there, standing not a foot away from the bed, was Loki. He looked like he was shimmering around the edges, almost like a mirage.

"Whoa! What the fuck! Jarvis, lights! Why didn't you tell me he was right in my god-damned bedroom!"

"I am sorry sir," Jarvis said, "but I did not detect his arrival."

The shimmering Loki smirked. "I am not truly here. This is a projection of my will."

"It's creepy as hell to be waked by *any* version of you."

The smirk grew. "I thought you enjoyed bringing strange people to your bedroom."

Tony couldn't help but laugh. "You just called yourself strange. I heard it."

"Ah, but you did not bring me here, did you? I am not even *here*. Please focus, Stark. I am back in Midgard, and I would like to use your laboratory without setting off any alarms. Please disarm them and permit me access."

It didn't seem like Loki needed permission, and Tony wondered if the god was just asking to be polite. Perhaps he really was trying to work alongside his fellow Avengers? Tony shook his head as he climbed out of bed. *Good lord. Avenger. He's an Avenger. Loki is an Avenger.*

A soft chuckle made him turn. "What?"

"You sleep nude."

Way too used to being naked around other people to be embarrassed or self-conscious, Tony arched an eyebrow. Not like he had anything to be embarrassed about. No one knew the assets of Tony Stark better than Tony Stark. "What of it? Got some problem with naked Tony?"

The smirk had morphed into a different kind of smile. Tony had never seen it before, and he didn't know how to define it. Softer, warmer, darker . . . almost appreciative? But no, surely not. The slightest bit predatory? Yeah, that was a better word. Projection-Loki moved into Tony's personal space and raised a hand. Tony shivered when ghostly fingers brushed the arc reactor.

"This thing gives off the most peculiar energy," he murmured. "What is its function? It feels vaguely similar to a protective ward."

Tony blinked. That was a weird revelation. He wondered if it would ever be useful. "Maybe I'll tell you about it someday, if you ever prove we can trust you."

Projection-Loki's smirk came back. "Not every facet of me is untrustworthy, Stark. But as pleasant as our chat has been, I would like to finish what I started. I have been gone four days to my promised three, and I'm certain Thor is getting anxious."

"More than anxious," Tony confirmed, rolling his eyes. "I think ol' Odin should have said you could be an Avenger under house arrest. This cavorting about the realms business seems like a little too much free rein. Especially when I have to deal with Thor's freaking out."

Projection-Loki snorted. "I would hardly call it 'cavorting'. Please let me know when you're in your laboratory."

"Wait, how do I do that?"

"Say my name."

The mirage vanished, and Tony grumbled under his breath as he shimmied into pajama pants and his silk robe. Feet into slippers, then he was out the door. "Jarvis, disable all video on the lab."

"Done, sir. Shall I inform Thor or the captain that Loki has returned?"

"No," Tony replied, covering a yawn. "It's three in the fucking morning. Let them sleep until dawn, at least."

In his lab, he switched on a few lights and computers. "Okay, Jarvis. I want you to monitor everything Loki does, but like I said no video. I want energy readings, that's all."

"Of course, sir. Ready when you are."

Nodding and stretching, Tony rolled his shoulders and sighed. Feeling a little ridiculous, he looked around. "Uh, Loki?"

Wisps of green light immediately coalesced in front of him, and Loki appeared. His projection had been garbed in that damned armor. Now he was once again wearing jeans and a soft, V-necked sweater. And he was barefoot. What was with being barefoot? And why did that matter so much? For some reason, it just made Loki look . . . younger.

"You changed," he commented.

Loki placed a modest-sized black box on the table. "You did make a house rule that I was not to wear my armor in your Tower, did you not?"

"Huh, guess I did," Tony mused. "Didn't expect it to hold any weight."

Loki started opening the box. "Thor suggested I might try to earn a little good will from my fellow Avengers. And my personal feelings aside, I did give my word I would help protect Midgard with you. We may as well start building trust. And you find this attire less threatening."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "I do, huh?"

"Yes. I can see it all over your face."

"And my face is a damn open book?"

"To me, yes," Loki replied, throwing him a smirk. "Unlike Thor, I have made learning to read people something of a study. You can learn much from a person by their body language."

"Yeah? And what's my body language telling you?"

Loki removed a velvet-wrapped bundle from his box and then pushed the box to the floor. It vanished before hitting the surface. "You are far more comfortable around me than you'd like to be. You want to be angry and even hate me, but you don't."

The words put Tony's back up. He straightened and took several steps toward Loki. "I don't, do I? And you got this from my posture?"

The smirk was back. "I wouldn't oversimplify it with the word 'posture', but more or less."

For a handful of seconds, Tony was seriously pissed off. Then it faded. What was the point? He didn't hate Loki. He kind of enjoyed the psychotic son of a bitch's snark and he was intelligent and tricky. And if Tony was an Aesir, he probably would have gotten on famously with the god of mischief. Shit. He raked his fingers through his hair as he watched Loki unwrap the velvet covering.

"Fine," he admitted, "I don't hate you. But I don't *like* you, so watch yourself."

Loki chuckled quietly. "I always do, Stark. I assume everyone I meet will attempt to stab me in the back someday."

"Clearly, you hang out around the wrong crowd," Tony said with a snort. "No one here will stab you in the back, princess. Scout's honor." He made the hand-signal.

Loki's smile seemed genuine. "You needn't comfort me, Stark. I've been alive far, far longer than you. I'm not a child."

Tony cocked his head to the side. "Yeah, let's see. You're a thousand years old? At least?"

"In your human terms, one-thousand forty-eight," Loki replied.

"And how long do Aesir live?"

"Mm, somewhere between five and six thousand."

"So approximately one-fifth of your lifespan has been lived," Tony said. "In our human terms, that makes you about eighteen."

Loki stopped fussing with the velvet wrapping and looked at Tony with an appraising eye. "Is that how you see me? A teenager?"

Tony blinked, and his mind started racing. In the space of a few heartbeats, everything clicked into a new place. "Yeah. You've hit your rebellious teenage phase. That's why you lashed out. To get Daddy Warbucks' attention. And since you Asgardians are larger than life, of course your acting out is larger than life, too." It made perfect sense.

Loki stared at him like he'd lost his mind. Then he began to laugh. It started low and soft, then it grew in intensity if not volume. He practically doubled over, one hand gripping the edge of the table for support. It was possibly the most genuine sound Tony had ever heard him make, and it was completely disarming. So much so, in fact, that Tony wasn't certain he could even classify Loki as 'villain' in his own mind any longer.

How . . . alarming.

"Oh, Stark," Loki chuckled, wiping a tear from his pale cheek. "You always manage to surprise me, just when I think I have you clearly defined. I don't know whether to be insulted or amused."

"I think you do know," Tony argued, "given that you're laughing your face off right now."

With a last snicker and shake of his head, Loki removed the velvet wrapping. The staff wasn't as long as Tony had expected. In fact, it was about the size of the scepter Loki had wielded in New York. He frowned.

"That's not a staff."

"It will be," Loki said. "It isn't quite finished." He removed a small sphere from the velvet.

Tony moved closer, curious. "Huh, look at that. Is that crystal?"

"Yes," Loki replied, "though one you'll have never encountered. The dwarves of Nidavellir call it god's tear."

Always eager to see new and interesting things, Tony held out a hand. "Lemme see."

Loki's amused eyes told him he thought Tony was the one acting like a teenager, and he surprised Tony by handing him the sphere. "Try not to drop it. It's far more fragile than spun sugar."

Tony gingerly cupped it in his palms. If it weren't for the cold feel of it, he never would have guessed he was holding anything. It had no weight. But he could see large crystals formed beneath the glassy surface, almost like snowflakes magnified many times and preserved under glass.

"It's pretty," he commented. "What's it for?"

"A storage vessel," Loki replied, holding out his hand, "and a focusing agent. Crystals such as these are capable of storing vast amounts of energy. I will be able to fill it up with magic and expend it before utilizing my own personal stores. It will also allow me to channel the natural energies of Yggdrasil without having to expend vital concentration on doing it through my own body."

It was Tony's turn to stare. "Yeah, I'm going to nod my head and smile and pretend I understood everything you just said and it didn't freak me the fuck out."

Smirking, Loki set the sphere on the velvet wrap. "Did Thor send Miss Foster home?"

"Why?" Tony asked with a bit of a leering grin. "You fancy big brother's flame?"

"Hardly," Loki scoffed, not sounding defensive. "I used her knowledge of the cosmos, but there is still much I would enjoy learning from her."

"What about me?" Tony demanded. "I'm pretty smart too, yanno."

"Yes, but you possess a very different skill set than Miss Foster. And somehow, I feel you lack the patience to be a teacher."

"True," Tony said after a moment of thought. He watched Loki remove a length of metal that looked like white gold. "What are you doing now?"

"Completing my staff," Loki said, sounding distracted. "Tell me something, Stark. Did you want to be an Avenger?"

Tony leaned against the table on the opposite side from Loki. "Yes and no. Why d'ya ask?"

"You don't seem like a team player," Loki commented.

"What? Hey, I was ready to give up my life to stop you and those damn Chitauri," Tony snapped.

"I meant no offense. To clarify, you seem the type who trusts in your abilities and would prefer not to place your fate in the hands of others."

"Oh. Well in that case, yes. I figure, if I can do the job right, why mess with other people? I *hate* fixing mistakes when I can do it right in the first place."

"Not unlike myself," Loki mused, aligning his metal pole with the top half of his staff.

Tony shifted, not sure he liked being compared to Loki. At the same time, he could follow his reasoning. *Maybe that's why I don't hate the guy.* "You're more selfish than me," he said, just because he felt it needed to be said.

Loki let out a huff of laughter. "Perhaps I merely have a stronger sense of self-preservation."

As Tony watched, Loki held the two pieces of metal together with one hand and held the other hand above them. Green light sprang up between his palms, and it coiled around where the two halves met. This went on for several moments, then Loki took his hands away and the staff was whole.

"Wow, I wish welding was that easy," Tony muttered. "Is that sturdy?"

"Stronger than anything you could make with your technology," Loki confirmed. "It couldn't be broken by any force . . . except perhaps Mjölhnir."

That admission sounded pretty grudging. Tony grinned. "Did you get all that, Jarvis?"

"Yes, sir," Jarvis replied. "The energy readings are unlike anything else we've encountered, including the output from the protective ward of two weeks ago."

Tony shook his head. "You and your damn magic being all shifty and tricky."

Loki looked amused. And smug again. "Should I apologize that my magic is too unique for you to categorize?"

"Self-satisfied bastard," Tony said good-naturedly. "I like a challenge."

"And I enjoy watching people concede defeat," Loki rejoined. "Shall we see which of our desires is fulfilled first?"

"You're on, princess. I win, you turn all *your* hair pink."

A soft, soft laugh. "I will not agree to such absurd terms."

"Why? Afraid I'll win?"

"No. And do not attempt to appeal to my masculine pride by calling me a coward, either. Such petty tricks don't work on me. I simply never make a bargain that holds no benefit to me." He lifted his staff.

It distracted Tony, and he studied it. The haft was almost as tall as Loki, and the head reached just higher than Loki's. The metal was highly reflective, the same color as white gold. The texture was smoother, though. It almost didn't even look like metal. And the head was a sort of five-pointed cup for the crystal sphere. The points looked a bit like wicked sharp claws, but only a bit. They were thin, so the sphere could be easily seen.

"Quite a piece," Tony remarked. "Pain to carry it around though."

Loki shook his head, now settling the sphere amidst the five points. "It will come when I call, similar to Mjölhnir. The hammer's creation is a bit flawed, this staff won't *fly* to me. It will simply appear in my hand." Another smug smile.

Tony shook his head. *Brother complex much?* "Okay, so back to our deal. If I win, you do what I

want. Whatever I want."

Another flare of green light, and the sphere was firmly attached to the staff. Loki set the butt end on the floor and seemed to appraise his handiwork. "Those terms are even worse than the first."

"It's fine. You win, I'll do whatever you want. Perfect, right?"

Loki smiled without looking at him. "What I want, Stark, you are not even capable of providing."

"I don't mean some weird, complicated, magical, I'm-a-flippin'-Asgardian-god-and-you're-just-a-human shit. I mean anything. Want me to shake you a martini? Done. Want me to make you a sandwich? Done. Want me to teach you Latin? Done. Want me to suffer another day of pink hair? Done. And I win, you do the same kinds of things for me."

"You speak Latin?"

"Sort of."

"As tempting as your idiot deal is, I decline," Loki said. "The only way you could learn enough about my magic to be useful is if I allowed it. Do you not think I could mask all energy output from your scanning? I simply do not because there is no point."

"Wait, you could do *undetectable* magic?"

"Of course. How do you suppose I have traveled halfway across the Nine without Heimdall's eye ever falling on me?"

"How would I know?" Tony grumbled. "Damn sneaky gods and your freaky magic."

Loki chuckled faintly. "May I leave this here? It's not quite done, but I can't finish it just yet."

"Why not?"

"I lack the . . . tools."

"If you're planning another jaunt to the other realms—" Tony began.

"No, nothing like that. It will require a different sort of spell, one that takes time to prepare."

Glad Loki was being so forthcoming, Tony nodded. "Just let me know when you're ready to come back and finish and I'll let you in the lab."

Loki gently lay his staff on the table, draping the velvet wrapping back over it. Then he turned to face Tony. "Thank you. Now, is there a place we may eat at this hour?"

"What? Really?"

"Yes. I am quite hungry. I haven't eaten since I left Midgard."

"*What!* But that was four days ago!"

"Yes. As I stated, I am quite hungry."

"That qualifies as *starving*, idiot. Come on. There are a million places open twenty-four-seven in New York. Just . . . put some shoes on."

He decided to drive. Loki walked in a small circle around Tony's red car, looking perfectly human and sexy (*whoa, what the hell is wrong with me?*) in a long black coat and silk scarf.

"This is an impressive machine. What do you call it?"

"A Lamborghini," Tony replied, opening the door for Loki without thinking.

The god didn't comment. In fact, he looked rather pleased by the gesture as he slid into the passenger seat. Tony climbed into the driver's seat. He didn't focus on Loki's content expression. He didn't consider his own totally relaxed state. And he sure as hell didn't think to himself this felt like a date.

Thirteenth Installment: Interlude

This is not content I'd originally planned to write. It's basically self-indulgent crap, just so you know. XD

Thirteenth Installment: An Interlude

The 24-hour diner had a dark, musty ambiance and wasn't very clean, but the food was wonderful. Tony had come here on numerous occasions when he and Pepper were up late working on something and needed a break. The two people on staff both stared at Loki like he was a god, and he ignored them like they were peasants.

Tony plopped down in a booth, and Loki slid down opposite him with a look of distaste.

"You frequent places like this with regularity?" he asked primly.

Tony grinned. "Sure do. What's the matter, princess? Too rugged for ya?"

Loki's chin went up a little. "The grand hall in Asgard looks much worse after one of the celebrations of Thor's great deeds."

"Then you should feel right at home. C'mon, the place looks like shit but the food's great. Let me order for you."

The god waved an elegant, slim hand. "Please. I wouldn't know where to begin."

Tony chuckled and motioned to the waitress, who headed over with a pot of coffee. She gave both of them a flirtatious smile. "Hi, Mr. Stark." She set two coffee cups down and filled them. "Late night working?"

Tony smiled, noticing how she adjusted her tight, low-cut shirt to expose a bit more of her lovely, plump breast. "You could say that. How about two of the usual?"

"Sure thing. Who's your handsome guest?"

Loki completely ignored her. His ignoring her was so complete, in fact, that the woman may as well not have existed as far as he was concerned. He gazed out the window, posture totally relaxed, face displaying neither annoyance nor any other emotion. It was utter dismissal. And probably, it was the rudest thing Tony had ever seen him do. Disdain would have been nicer. Shaking his head with a rueful smile, Tony looked back at her.

"Sorry, he's really shy. Don't mind him."

The woman giggled. "I like 'em that way." She winked and trotted off.

"Wow," Tony said. "Are you always like this with strangers?"

Loki gave him a sideways glance. "And what could I possibly gain by encouraging her whorish behavior?"

Tony barked a laugh. "Calling her a whore is harsh."

"I really don't care what you think, Stark."

"Okay, are you being so bitchy because I brought you to a diner instead of a 5 star restaurant?"

Loki faced Tony, looking vaguely surprised. He blinked. "I assume that's some sort of Midgardian slang for ill-humored? I'm just distracted. And perhaps a bit exhausted."

"Well then, why did you want to go out?" Tony demanded. "You could have gone to bed like any normal person at this hour."

"I'm hungrier than tired," Loki said. He settled his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "You never answered my question when I asked you if you wanted to be an Avenger."

"Yes I did. I said -"

"Let me rephrase. You didn't give me a satisfactory answer."

Tony snorted. "Well then, that changes everything. The princess isn't satisfied."

Loki straightened. "I'm beginning to contemplate cutting that smart tongue out of your mouth."

Leaning forward, Tony gave him a small grin. "Why cut it out? There are much better things you could do with it." *Shit, what the hell is wrong with me? That sounded like a come-on. What am I doing coming onto Loki?*

The god had a sort of similar expression on his face, but it was also a bit contemplative. "Such as sew it to the roof of your mouth?" he inquired. His voice was almost sweet.

Chuckling, Tony finally took a sip of his coffee. It was rich and dark and slightly earth-bitter, just the way he liked it. "Your imagination sucks."

"And yours appears to be hyperactive," Loki said with a smirk, picking up his own cup of coffee and sampling it. "Mm, this is positively dreadful. What is it, and why would you serve it to me?"

"Technically, I didn't serve it to you," Tony snarked, "and it's called coffee."

Loki set the cup on the scarred table. "Coffee. Does your female with the ample bosom have anything more palatable to serve me?"

For a few seconds, Tony just looked at him with a crooked grin on his face. To see such a prim and fussy side of Earth's so-called worst villain was . . . unexpectedly cute. "How about tea?"

"Is Midgardian tea better than this swill?"

"I'm sure you'll think so," Tony said, waving to the waitress. She came quickly with that same appreciative grin. "Hey doll, mind bringing my socially-inept friend some tea? Coffee's a little too strong for his delicate taste buds."

That earned him a glare from Loki, the waitress tittered again. "Of course, Mr. Stark. Cream and sugar?"

"Yeah, better," Tony confirmed. "Thanks, love."

She hustled off, and Tony looked back at Loki. The god was watching him with a smile neither mirthful nor nice. "Your gall is astounding, human."

Tony made a dismissive gesture. "I'll have you know people love my gall. In fact I'm kind of known for it. Just give in to the Stark charm, kid. It wins everyone over eventually."

Loki actually rolled his eyes. "I can't imagine why."

The waitress came back with a mug of hot water and a couple bags of various Stash tea flavors. "Here ya go, honey," she said, winking at Loki.

Who continued to ignore her. Tony sighed. Well, what was he expecting? "Thanks," he said for his rude companion.

When she was gone, Loki pulled the teabag from the package and lifted it. After a sniff, his nose wrinkled. "This is better than coffee?" he grumbled. He put the bag in the hot water. "I'm accustomed to loose-leaf tea. It is flavorful and fresh and actually tastes like herbs that were grown out of earth. This smells nothing like that."

Tony's grin came back. "Damn you're hard to please. Are you always like this when someone takes you out?"

"This is not a customary activity in Asgard," Loki said, stirring the bag around the hot water. "The Aesir do not have grungy little diners serving mediocre food."

"So this is your first date?" Tony said, waggling his eyebrows.

Loki stopped fussing with the tea and set his hand on the table. His lips quirked in a small smile. "A date. From what I understand, a date is a Midgardian courting ritual."

Tony snorted a laugh. "A courting ritual. Well, I doubt anyone else would call it that."

"Oh?" Loki said, picking up his spoon again to remove the teabag. "What, pray tell, would you call it?"

"The first step to getting lucky."

Their eyes met again, and this time Loki looked lost between disgusted and amused. "Mm, not so different from the Aesir, I see."

Tony chuckled. "So go on, princess. Tell me how you like the tea."

Loki disdained both the cream and sugar, raising the cup to his lips and sipping. He grimaced. "It isn't delicious, but it's better than the alternative."

Tony grinned into his coffee mug. "Glad to hear you approve."

Loki set the cup down. "You have twice evaded my question about your joining the Avengers."

"Maybe I just don't want to answer."

"And why would you not?"

"Maybe it's super personal. Maybe it's embarrassing. Maybe I just think it's none of your business."

"And is it any of those things?"

"Nope," Tony admitted with a grin, taking another sip of coffee as the waitress returned. Shirley was her name . . . right? She put down two plates of the usual: a stack of buttermilk pancakes drowning in butter and maple syrup, a pile of perfectly cooked scrambled eggs and cheese, and a ham steak the size of Tony's face. "Thanks, doll. You sure know the way to a man's heart." He winked.

She giggled and again tried to get Loki's attention with her chest.

At least he waited until she was gone to offer criticism on the food. "What is this?"

"Pancakes," Tony said, grabbing his fork. "Trust me, you'll love it. Go on, dig in." He followed his own advice.

"The way you humans prepare food is certainly unique," Loki muttered, cutting a bite from the pancakes. He brought it to his lips with an expression that clearly said he expected to hate it. It took less than a second for his countenance to smooth as he chewed slowly and swallowed. "Well, it isn't terrible."

Tony laughed, shaking his head. "Try to contain your enthusiasm. You're embarrassing me."

"Hmph," was the only answer Loki deigned give as he took another dainty bite.

Seriously, what other kind of bite would the prissy god take? And why was it so damn cute that he was being so prissy and demanding?

"You're staring again, Stark. It's rather distracting."

Tony immediately smirked. "Maybe I just see something I like?"

"The large-breasted female did bring you your own pancakes."

"You sure are hung up on the size of her chest," Tony teased. "Got a thing for D plus?"

Displaying his usual calm demeanor, Loki didn't take the bait. He simply took another small bite. "A woman need not expose skin to appeal to a man. Do you suppose my mother paraded herself around like a trollop? Of course not. She was a queen in every sense of the word, and she was widely considered the most beautiful woman in the Nine."

Tony's fork settled lightly on the edge of his plate as he stared at Loki for whole new reasons. It was the first time he'd heard the god speak of anyone in such gentle tones. Tender. Almost dulcet. "Wow, you really loved her, didn't you?" He knew from Thor how she had died.

Loki's verdant eyes flashed. "Of course," he snapped. "She was my mother."

Smiling softly, Tony absolutely could not stop the impulse to reach over and cover Loki's hand with his own. It surprised him to find it was smaller than his own. "I'm sorry for what happened to her."

The god went still. His eyes searched Tony's face for several moments before sliding his hand free. "She may have given her life, but she is not gone."

Tony blinked. That sounded awfully literal. "Can you . . . still speak to her?"

"Yes. She often comes to me, especially while I was finding the place to hide the Aether."

Leaning back, Tony folded his arms and shook his head. "You're amazing, you know that? You say things like that as if . . . it's old news. Why wouldn't you be able to commune with the departed? You're Loki."

Looking for all the world like a cat preening under the praise, Loki smiled and took another bite of the pancakes. "Not just anyone could do that, Stark. In fact, it requires a rather unique skill set. Which I possess."

Tony chuckled. "Of course you do. Clever bastard." He finally cut a big bite out of his pancakes and popped it into his mouth. Only to spit it out a second later when it tasted like dirty gym socks. "What the—!"

A look at Loki's smug face told him all he needed to know. "Oh, you didn't."

"It must be your penchant for creative nicknames," Loki mused serenely. "Brings out the worst in me."

Tony carefully sampled another bite and found it back to the usual pancakes and syrup and butter. He glared at Loki for good measure as he chewed. "Just when I'm starting to like you, you go and do shit like that."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Stark," Loki said primly, patting at his lips with a napkin. Completely unnecessarily. "It makes you look and sound like a barbarian."

Snorting, Tony attacked his meal with gusto. The realization rolled around in his head, *If this were anyone else, I'd be thinking about taking them home and getting lucky. Good conversation, someone not freaking out over my wealth and fame, and damn good looking.*

The most frightening part was, it being Loki wasn't quite the deterrent he'd thought it would be. And on the heels of that revelation came another. *I don't just not hate him. I like him. I actually like him. I like it when he tells me things about himself I didn't know. I like it that he let me order for him. I like this banter, I like that he's a Norse god and he's sitting here eating pancakes with me and obviously enjoying them.*

"You're staring again."

Smiling, Tony went back to his meal. "Glad you like the pancakes."

"It's a tolerable meal."

Tony laughed. "Well, since you told me something personal, I guess I'll tell you about my joining the Avengers. Tell you the truth, it wasn't that I didn't want to join. It feels nice to belong to a group of people who fight to protect Earth. Mostly, I didn't want to be controlled by SHIELD. I'll tell you a secret. I don't really like Director Fury. People who lack depth-perception can't be trusted."

Loki looked at him. Then he raised his hand and covered his face, and his shoulders started to shake. After a moment, Tony realized he was silently laughing.

"How do your observations manage to be both insightful and idiotic at the same time?" the god chortled.

Feeling proud of himself for how often he'd gotten Loki to laugh, Tony grinned. "Must be a gift. I'm brilliant, you know."

Loki lowered his hand, and those emerald eyes glittered with something foreign. "Yes, I know. For a human, you're quite above average."

"Oh, come on. Why'd you have to modify it with the human bit? Just say I'm brilliant and be done with it."

Loki smiled. It was sultry. "You're brilliant."

Tony almost swallowed his tongue. Then he broke into a beaming smile. "That's the sexiest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Loki's eyebrow quirked, perhaps at the vernacular. That smoldering expression didn't leave his face as he took another bite. And Tony was suddenly *very* interested in how Loki's lips closed around his fork and withdrew it from his mouth. Something in Loki's eyes told him the god was aware of the effect he was having. After a few seconds, he looked pointedly at Tony's plate with a smirk.

"Are you no longer hungry, Stark? You haven't taken a bite in several moments."

I want to take a bite out of you, Tony thought instantly. Then mentally smacked himself. What the hell is wrong with me! Why do I keep having these thoughts! This is Loki. LOKI. He would probably castrate me if he knew!

Loki was watching him through sinfully long lashes. And why did that smirk look the teeniest bit inviting? Seriously, this couldn't be good for Tony's health. In any way. *It's like playing the flirting game with a rabid tiger. One minute it's all fun and games, the next, Stark loses an arm.* He knew that. So then why was he still contemplating leaning forward and grabbing that smirking mouth in a kiss?

And why does he look like he's daring me to do just that? Crap.

Right. Food. Tony grabbed his coffee and chugged it. Maybe caffeine would bring him to his senses. "So tell me about your mom." Because that was a nice, unsexy topic.

Loki allowed it with a mellow smile. "What would you like to hear?"

"When did she first start communing with you? After . . . you know. Dying."

Lifting his mug, Loki sipped the tea with an absent expression. "Shortly after I left Svartalfheim having tricked Thor into believing me dead." His smile changed. It went from mellow to something almost painfully sweet. "She made a bargain with Hel. If she could remain between living and dying to stay with me, she would give Hel something in return. What that was, I do not know. But it means there is some chance my mother can return from Helheim."

"I thought only bad Asgardians went to Helheim when they died," Tony said with a frown. "The rest went to Valhalla."

"Yes, normally," Loki confirmed. "My mother chose not to. She knew she could make a bargain with Hel to remain in a sort of . . . well, in your human vernacular, Limbo."

"Wow," Tony said, shaking his head. "Like mother, like son. The apple didn't fall far from the tree, I see."

For some reason, Loki looked strangely pleased by those words. "My mother would have liked you," he said after another bite of pancake. "She enjoyed men with inappropriate senses of humor."

Tony suspected that was high praise. "I'm sure I would have liked her, too." Then he changed the subject. "D'ya think there's any chance you and Thor will reconcile? Might be kinda hard for the Avengers to work like a well-oiled machine if you go on hating him."

Loki grimaced and looked away. His eyes wandered over the view outside the diner window. "I don't hate Thor," he said after a long while. His eyes slid shut. "He honestly has no idea where my anger and resentment came from. How do you hate someone who insists on loving you and forgiving you?"

Tony watched Loki for a bit in silence. "Maybe this will be good for you," he suggested. "You don't like being in his shadow, maybe you'll be able to find your own place."

Verdant eyes locked with dark brown. For a moment Tony wondered if he'd said something wrong, then Loki gave a soft snort and went back to eating. "Perhaps."

oOo

The rest of dinner (early, early breakfast?) was pleasant. Tony took them home around five, and he wondered when was the last time he'd done this. When he was in college? When they got back to the Tower, Tony invited Loki to have a drink with him on the top floor. In the four days since Loki's departure, he'd finally brought in new furniture and had begun to replace his liquor collection. It wasn't as magnificent as it'd been, but ah well.

Loki looked around and sighed softly. "It looks better." He gracefully lowered himself onto the couch and sprawled. "I am sorry for the damage I caused."

"Wasn't your fault," Tony dismissed it. Loki looked like a work of art. *God, has he always been this beautiful?* "I'm just glad no one was hurt."

Loki smirked faintly. "I should probably thank Dr. Banner."

Tony poured them both three fingers of scotch and sank down on the couch beside Loki. "I can't believe he survived. He slept for a day then was fine. Guy's amazing." He shook his head.

Raising the glass to his lips, Loki took a sip. Then immediately set the glass down on the glass coffee table. "That is absolutely dreadful. You humans certainly enjoy foul-tasting beverages."

Laughing, Tony took a sip of the strong, amber-colored liquor. "Oh, come on. I thought you Vikings loved to drink."

Loki gave him a cold glare. "Vikings were the savage humans who worshiped us. Do not compare us to *them*."

There was that prim tone of voice again. Tony grinned. "My bad, princess. I thought you *Aesir* loved to drink."

Loki lifted his chin. "Most do. I have never cared for the feeling of drunkenness. I have watched far too many men turn into flaming morons and make complete and utter asses of themselves."

For some reason, that was the funniest thing. Hearing a curse fall off those perfect lips in that proper, smooth voice . . . it took Tony several moments to contain his mirth. "That's when you know it's a real party! Don't tell me you've never participated in a drinking game?"

"I most certainly have not," Loki disdained, "nor will I ever."

Still chuckling, Tony took another sip and closed his eyes as lovely warmth settled in his belly. When he finished his own, he grabbed Loki's. "You're missing out. The trick is to make sure you're a better drinker than your game buddies. Then you get to sit back and watch them do all the stupid shit."

Loki chuckled. "While I fail to see the appeal, I can see why you'd find it entertaining."

"Was that an insult?" Tony demanded with a glare. It was half-hearted at best with the nice buzz he was beginning to feel.

"It was an observation, no slight intended."

"Yeah, I don't believe that. You never say anything you don't mean."

Loki's eyes seemed dark and dangerous, glittering in the dim light of the foyer. "A wise thing to remember."

"I try to remember everything you say," Tony said, eyes drinking in Loki's relaxed appearance.

"Oh? Are my words important to you, Stark?" Loki purred.

"Hell yeah, if it means surviving," Tony replied, unconsciously leaning toward the slimmer man. "You're like a pit of vipers. I never know if you'll just slither around me or strike."

A slow smile curved Loki's lips. "Mm. Perhaps you really are brilliant."

"I wasn't complimenting you, ya know," Tony murmured. When the hell had he gotten so close to Loki? He could actually smell him. It was like a warning, the scent of a storm coming on the wind. Somehow fresh, somehow exotic, and intoxicating.

Oh, that smile. Oh, those eyes. Dark green pools waiting to drown a careless man. "You would do well to keep that in mind," Loki whispered. "Always. I am not your friend, Stark."

"Definitely not," Tony agreed, and then their lips were touching.

Shit.

He'd lost his mind. He'd lost his fucking mind.

He almost moaned when Loki suddenly pressed up into the kiss. His lips were cool and dry, but not chapped. It was like an autumn breeze bringing the first promise of winter. Tony swept his tongue out, wanting to see if he tasted like new snow.

For several seconds, Loki's mouth remained firmly shut, rejecting entry. Disapproving, never in his life having liked being denied what he wanted, Tony bit Loki's lower lip. A soft, low laugh rewarded him, pouring off Loki's lips in wicked delight as his mouth opened. Tony instantly plunged his tongue inside, tangling with Loki's own and commanding it to come play.

Again, Loki denied him. Tony chased it around inside Loki's mouth, and when he finally managed to suck it into his own mouth, he captured Loki's tongue between his teeth to hold it there. Loki sucked in a faint breath. There was no sound behind it other than that, but Tony's pulse quickened as if the god had moaned.

Had a kiss *ever* felt so wrong, so right, so dangerous, so insane, so god-damned *perfect*? He was half kissing Loki, half just plain biting him. It was more than a little aggressive, Tony felt like he was practically eating the Aesir. It went on until he was feeling light-headed from lack of oxygen, until Loki's sharp teeth snapped together and Tony jerked back with a faint yelp.

He tasted blood. Loki's expression was both a smirk and a warning, pupils wider and making his eyes look darker. A spot of red on his lips made Tony breathe harder. His own blood. Then Loki rose, all liquid grace.

"Thank you for a diverting evening, Stark," he murmured, licking the blood off his lip with the mother of all smoldering gazes. He glided toward the elevator.

Tony didn't follow him, but his eyes were glued to the god's ass until the doors opened and Loki stepped inside. His eyes never left Tony's as they closed. Tony threw himself down onto the couch with a groan.

I just kissed Loki. I just kissed him like a jerk. I can't believe he let me do that. Any of the others he'd been with probably would have slapped him hard enough to knock teeth loose before storming off. Tony clapped a hand over his mouth and closed his eyes. That wasn't the worst part.

Worst part was, Tony would try that again. Soon.

Because it'd been the hottest kiss of his entire life.

Fourteenth Installment

Fourteenth Installment: Pathways from Nowhere

Thor was not pleased. His disapproval rolled around the entire room like a powerful monsoon, charging the air with the threat of lightning. The only person present who seemed immune to it was Loki. Loki, leaning against the bar counter with an expression of total ease, hands loosely folded as he gazed at Thor. His countenance said he couldn't even fathom why Thor was so upset.

It might have been rather comical if Thor weren't so physically impressive.

Natasha could see it in the faces of her fellow Avengers that they were too nervous to interrupt the tableau, perhaps afraid of being on the wrong end of Mjölnir's wrath. Natasha wasn't unintimidated, but frankly it was more than a little annoying to see amusement blossoming on Loki's face, obviously aware of Thor's effect on everyone else.

"We had a *bargain*, Loki," Thor rumbled. "Odin was lenient in light of your previous actions, but you were not given free rein to flit about the Nine as you please, when you please!"

"Am I, then, to remain prisoner to the Avengers?" Loki inquired mildly. "If that is what you somehow envisioned, perhaps you should have included that particular term in our *bargain*, Thor. I agreed to join the Avengers. I did not agree to house arrest, and you did not demand it. And I have a right to build a weapon if I am expected to fight at their side."

Well, he was kind of right.

"Do not play games with me, Loki," Thor growled. "You know very well—"

"Spare me," Loki cut him off, murder beginning to glitter in his eyes. "You have been controlling me in one way or another for *far* too long. I'm tired of—"

"Your actions made this necessary," Thor interrupted. "It will take time to earn my forgiveness, and that of—"

"Because you somehow imagine I *desire* that?"

"You're lucky the Allfather and Director Fury agreed to this at all!" Thor rumbled. "This is a chance for you to redeem—"

Loki made a vicious slashing motion with one hand, and Thor's teeth clacked shut. His blue eyes widened in shock. Loki glared at him, looking too angry to gloat over what he'd clearly just done. Thor wrapped his large hand around his hammer's hilt and took two menacing steps forward before Natasha decided this had gone on long enough.

Moving with the silent speed which had earned her the codename Black Widow, she insinuated herself between them. She planted a hand on Thor's chest and one on Loki's, but she faced Thor. "Please," she said, voice low and entreating. "You're on Earth right now, remember? We aren't used to magic and . . ." she glanced pointedly at Mjölnir. "Magical weapons. What good does it do to be mad now, Thor? It's already done."

Now she looked at the other god. "And Loki, for the sake of everyone in this room, could you *please* not use your magic against Thor? I think we all agree we like it best when you two are at least civil."

"You kinda do treat him like a little kid," Tony abruptly piped up, appearing to pat Thor's shoulder. "Maybe you could lay off a little? And it's not exactly fair he can't have a weapon of choice when every one of us does. Yourself included, big guy."

The support was unexpected, to say the least. Natasha looked gratefully at Stark, who winked at her.

Still looking unhappy, Loki made another gesture that unglued Thor's teeth. Then, as Thor drew in a breath to perhaps start all over, the emerald-eyed god disappeared in a wisp of green smoke.

"Where'd he go, Jarvis?" Tony demanded.

"He's in his room, Sir," the AI replied.

Natasha relaxed a little, and Tony trotted to the elevator. Steve moved to follow him, but Stark waved him away. For her part, Natasha faced the thunder god and took a deep breath.

"I know it's hardly my place," she began, "but you *really* need to stop antagonizing him. If you ever expect him to fight seamlessly with us, this bad blood between you two needs to go away."

Wow, it was weird to be lecturing a god.

Thor looked just as shocked.

Bruce and Steve wore expressions suspiciously close to grins.

Clint stepped up beside Natasha. "She's right. For better or worse, you made Loki join us. If we all treat him like an Avenger, then just maybe he'll start acting like one."

A little surprised to have an ally in Clint, Natasha felt grateful just the same. Forgiving an enemy may not be in his nature, but he was practical like her. *He spared my life, after all.* And perhaps he felt some leniency toward the god of mischief because of the enchantment he'd placed on Clint. She shuddered.

I know I would have hated it if some immortal witch had bent my will to her own.

Thor started chuckling, shaking his head. "My friends," he said gently. "I believe our *very* long lives take away our ability to bend. You're right, of course. Treating Loki like an enemy will gain us nothing."

Natasha let go the breath she didn't remember holding.

Then Steve was beside her, a reassuring and strong presence. "Thanks," he said to Thor. "It's a learning curve for all of us, trust me."

Natasha couldn't help a small laugh.

"You can say that again," Dr. Banner muttered.

Even Clint smiled.

oOo

Loki paced like a caged animal, fury seething in him like poison. This anger, this resentment, he was sick of them. It was a waste of energy, and such intensity of emotion was distracting. It could make a person act rashly instead of calmly and with forethought. Two things on which Loki prided

himself. And yet, Thor had the ability to strip away that part of him and make him lash out like a petulant child.

I hate him. I hate him so much.

He clenched his teeth. He hated that Thor could make him hate.

Realizing seiðr was rising from him in a green mist, Loki took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. *This is absurd. While I was locked up in Asgard, I didn't care a whit what Thor thought or did. Now that I'm free, he can rile me with a few words.* He closed his eyes with a rueful smile. Well, when he was locked up, his fate had been completely controlled by the Allfather.

Now, it was tangled up in Thor's hands. That was much worse.

I will help the Avengers destroy my enemies. And then, Thor, you will never see me again. He thought about his incomplete staff in Stark's laboratory. Tonight, he would complete it. Then he would take his fate back into his own hands. Then perhaps he would regain his emotional equilibrium.

A knock on his door made him look up. For a moment he thought of ignoring it. Then he sighed. "Come in."

Stark walked in. Well, he was better than Thor. Or any of the other Avengers, really.

"Hey," the man said, sitting on the edge of the bed without permission. "Thought you might want to vent."

Loki looked at him in silence a moment before turning away and pacing to the window. He leaned against the frame and looked out over the streets below. "I do not."

"Oh, c'mon princess," Stark wheedled, "you'll feel better."

Loki twitched when Stark was suddenly right beside him. He turned so he was facing the human, drawing himself up straight. "Do not patronize me," he warned softly.

Stark actually looked offended. "What's with the tone? I thought we were getting on good."

A smile quirked the corner of Loki's mouth. "In what way?"

A raised eyebrow. "Uh, last night when—"

Loki placed a finger over Stark's lips. "An amusing way to pass the time. Do not assume it meant something." He leaned the slightest bit forward, distantly surprised to find he was only about half a head taller than the human. "Or that it will happen again."

The glimmer in Stark's eyes told Loki the human was thinking about doing it again right this second, so he straightened stepped around him.

"You needn't mollify me, Stark."

"And what if I wanna?" Stark demanded, sounding ridiculously sullen.

Loki stopped and faced him. "I'm really not in the mood for our usual banter." He waved a hand to the door in a clear warning.

Which Stark did not heed. A half dozen steps had him crowding back into Loki's personal space.

"How about I take you out for lunch? You could use a break from Thor."

Not sure whether to be irritated or amused, Loki resisted the hand on his elbow urging him to the door. "What is this concern, Stark?"

Stark gave him a surprisingly serious look. "I kind of know how you feel."

"I very much doubt that."

"Look, you aren't alone anymore. You might as well accept you're part of a team now. And maybe it's different in Asgard, but us humans take care of each other."

Swaying more toward amusement now, Loki raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? And you imagine you somehow have the ability to *take care* of me?"

"Hey, I'm good at all kinds of things."

Loki snorted. "Now that I've recovered my strength, it won't be long before we challenge the witch. Let me tell you exactly what will happen then. There will be a battle, perhaps several. You will all be injured, some of you mortally. And who do you think will *take care* of that? Thor with his lightning and impressive strength?" He made a rude sound in the back of his throat. "Not hardly."

"So then let me be good for the only thing I'm good for," Stark said. "Vent. I'm a real good listener."

With a faint sigh, Loki slid his arm free from Stark's hand. "There's no point. There's nothing to say. I don't need your misplaced concern for my emotional well-being."

"And people wonder why I'm a glib asshole. I try to be nice and I get bitten."

"You did liken me to a viper."

Stark smirked. "I said you were like a *pit* of vipers. As in, multiple vipers. I can handle a single viper. You're ten vipers. Twenty. Hell, a hundred."

"More than you can handle?" Loki teased.

Never in a millennium would he have thought to find enjoyment in teasing a human. It was interesting to see poorly-veiled desire flare in Stark's chocolate brown eyes. Not a stranger to being desired, he'd still never seen it in the countenance of an enemy. Even a once-enemy. He was aware of Tony's penchant for bedding indiscriminately, but this was a bit more than indiscriminate.

This was flat out irresponsible. And Stark apparently had no sense of self-preservation.

"I'm pretty sure you'll be the death of me," the man muttered.

No sense of self-preservation, but at least an iota of sense. "I did already try that. Do you recall? I could stage a repeat. This window is relatively high—"

"Ha ha, very funny, Viper Boy." Stark wrapped his hand around Loki's elbow again. "Clearly your sense of humor sucks when you're hungry. Feel like taking a ride in my Lamborghini again?"

"Another date, Stark?"

"Hey, I've never seen you calmer than when you're eating. Pancakes again?"

"Offering me the same meal twice in a row?" Loki all but purred, this time allowing Stark to lead him into the hall. "I've turned people into rats for less."

"Then how about Italian? I know a cozy little place where they always have a table reserved for me."

Loki sighed faintly. "Very well. I suppose I may as well acclimatize myself to Midgardian cuisine."

"It's a good thing I'm not easily wounded," Stark grumbled. "I might be in tears."

Loki just smiled. "You'd be a poor Avenger."

Besides, he thought as he gave in, it might be nice to have the distraction. Until tonight, and then he wouldn't have to deal with Thor any longer.

ooo ooo

Technically, this shouldn't have been possible. But there wasn't enough written for Loki to have a confident explanation. In fact, the only person who might have been able to provide an answer was Malekith, and he was dead. It was almost a pity. The destruction of knowledge was always a pity.

I would have liked to pick his brain. He and I wouldn't have been enemies. That is, until he threatened Asgard. Loki closed his eyes. Malekith was responsible for the death of Frigga. Shaking himself from his thoughts, he focused. *All of that will come soon enough.* He stepped into the dreamscape.

It was a dreamscape that didn't exist. Once Thor had finally gotten rid of Æsa, Loki had been able to melt his own dreamscape away and create this place. No, it was more appropriate to say he'd found this place. He smiled. He'd found a place that hadn't existed until a need of it had arisen. As soon as he entered it, a familiar presence rushed to wrap around him.

It was like an embrace, but different. There were no arms. No body. Just a singular will to *surround* him. His smile softened.

"Why this urgency?" he murmured. "I did promise, didn't I?"

A strong sense of satisfaction emanated from the presence. Though it was a sexless entity, it thought of itself as 'she', and Loki had always been of a mind to indulge 'her'. After all, she was about to make him the most powerful weapon in existence.

I missed you, she said.

There were no words, but he was aware of them just the same. He laughed softly, holding up a hand. "I was just here yesterday. Are you ready to step out of the darkness?"

Yes, yes, yes, she immediately replied.

Loki almost winced at her zeal when in her excitement she tightened herself around him. "All right then," he purred. "You won't have to do much. When I leave this time, I'm going to leave a trail to myself. Follow it all the way into my body. Can you do that?"

Yes, yes, yes, she replied. *I've wanted this so much—*

"I know," he said with a chuckle. "Hardly a day passes when you don't complain of your

impatience."

An impression of mirth. *You have made me wait all this time.*

"But not a day longer than I promised," Loki pointed out, preparing to leave the dreamscape. "Follow me back. Once you're there, you'll know what to do."

The presence seemed to diminish, though the eagerness did not. *I'm ready, I'm ready.*

Loki stepped out of the place that didn't exist back into his dreamscape. It was a bit ironic that he was about to use Æsa's trick of bringing something into reality from here. He made a single trail of dark green in his dreamscape, tying it firmly inside his own physical body so she would know where to go. Then he stepped out of the dreamscape.

His eyes opened. Easy part done. Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, he took in the darkness around him and estimated it was probably a few hours past midnight. The only two people actually sleeping in Stark Tower were Thor and Stark himself, the rest of the Avengers back at their own domiciles.

He teleported himself right inside Stark's laboratory. She would be here soon, and he didn't want to waste time walking to the lab. This was going to be one of the strangest things he'd ever done, and he didn't expect it to feel pleasant.

A single beep told him Stark's artificial intelligence had been alerted to his arrival. "Access to this laboratory is restricted," it told Loki in its unemotional voice. "Mr. Stark has been notified. Please vacate the premises."

Loki ignored it. Neither Stark nor a disembodied, fabricated voice had the power to actually stop him from going where he wished. He pushed the black velvet cover off his mostly completed staff and took long, slow breaths. Any moment now, it would begin.

Sure enough, he felt it the instant she followed his trail right into his physical body. And oh, had he ever been right—it was not pleasant. Though she could fill no more space than the palm of his hand, she felt too big for his body. Grimacing at the sheer *strangeness* of it, he placed his palms on the table next to the crystal globe of the staff.

All right, he thought, just like I showed you.

oOo

Tony spared just enough time to fling on his robe before bolting out of his bedroom. "What is he doing, Jarvis?"

"Unknown, sir," Jarvis replied, "but I sense a significant surge of energy. It's completely different from anything I've recorded to date."

"God damn it," Tony muttered, willing the elevator to take him down faster. "Why the hell did we agree to this? I'm going to die from the ulcers before I'm fifty."

The door to his lab slid open at his arrival, and Tony ran inside. Yet another bizarre scene was waiting for him, and Tony ran a mental inventory to see if he was insane. He'd been flirting with this man, this *god*, without keeping in mind how strange and freaky and totally dangerous Loki was. And definitely insane.

An unholy nimbus of black light surrounded Loki, and his whole body was sort of caved in as if he

was stuck in the act of dry heaving. He looked pale as death, beads of perspiration popping out on his face and neck. And from his mouth . . . Jesus, from his mouth. It looked like he was vomiting some sort of liquid that had no relationship with gravity.

The liquid, black and gleaming brighter than metal, slowly made its way to the crystal of Loki's staff. As Tony watched, completely mesmerized, the liquid (*is that liquid? I mean, I have no fucking clue what it really is*) sank into the crystal globe, causing it to flare with that unnatural black light. How could light even be black?

So shocked and entranced by what he was witnessing, Tony almost missed Thor rushing into the room, Mjölnir gripped in a large hand. He froze on the threshold just like Tony, eyes widening in what looked like horror.

Loki ignored them both. His body convulsed once, and the last bit of black . . . stuff flowed from his mouth and into the staff's crystal. He half collapsed against the table when it was done, and the crystal burst into brilliant green light before it went dark. The crystal now looked like a perfectly black sphere.

"Is that what I think it is?" Thor rumbled, hefting his hammer as though seriously contemplating using it.

Loki barely spared him a glance, chest heaving from the apparent exertion.

"Uh, in the dark here," Tony said. "Care to share with the class, buddy? Should I be concerned for my safety?"

Thor took several menacing steps forward. "Please tell me, brother," he growled. "*Tell me* that wasn't the Aether!"

Tony twitched. "Shit, the Aether? Really? That's what it looks like?"

Loki's lips curled in a rueful half smile. "You did demand I stop lying to you."

The bottom dropped out of Tony's stomach.

The air seemed charged with static, Thor's fury was palpable. He surged forward, grabbing a handful of Loki's sweater and yanking him close. "When will this end, Loki? Must I drag you back to Asgard in chains again?"

"And make you the liar and me the honest one?" Loki said with a wince and smirk.

"You *might* want to let him go," Tony said, taking a few steps back as the globe began to give off that terrible black light. "Jarvis?"

"Energy readings from the staff are spiking, sir," Jarvis confirmed.

Thor did not release Loki, leaning even closer to him. "Whatever you're doing, Loki, cease at once."

Loki laughed. It was a low, cold sound. "What I'm *doing*, Thor, is already done. What is *happening* now is not of my doing. And if you fancy keeping this hand, I would suggest you do as Stark said and remove it from me. She will protect me."

Thor did let go then, shoving Loki against the table. It rattled the staff as Loki collided with the edge. He grimaced, and Tony did too. That probably hurt.

"What did you do, Loki?" Thor snarled. "The truth!"

Loki straightened. "What I had to. Do you recall our discussion about the possibility of the Aether awakening to a kind of sentience?"

"Of course."

"It has already happened," Loki informed them. "I cannot say exactly what caused it, but when it entered your lovely Jane Foster, it sparked an awareness. Perhaps it's because humans lead such short lives they live with more furor and passion than others of the Nine. But when I found the Aether, the spark of awareness *already existed*. I had to . . . contain it."

"In a weapon for yourself?" Tony piped up. "Pretty convenient."

Loki gave him a look that told him he was irrelevant. How could a look say that? He turned his attention back to Thor.

"She latched onto me, not unlike a child with its parent," he explained. "I was the first one to speak *to* her. There was no way for me to stop the spark. So I removed it." He waved a hand to his newly finished staff. "The part of the Aether that is aware is here, safely contained in a place it cannot leave. The rest is where I hid it, beyond the reach of anyone."

He suddenly smiled, and it looked plenty self-satisfied. "I made a bargain with her. She can now experience life through my eyes, and she will protect me. Not unlike your Mjölnir, except with more sense of self."

Tony shook his head. "She agreed to a prison of your making, and she'll protect you. How exactly did you get her to agree to that?"

Thor looked troubled. "They call him Silvertongue," he murmured, "for e'er could he sweet-talk a mother into selling her own son, convince her it was for the best."

Loki's eyes looked endless black in the dim light of the lab. "Your friends were snide when they called me that, but when you were not around to protect them it was only whispered when they thought I did not hear."

A shiver trekked up Tony's spine. Never had it felt more real that he was facing two gods. He felt small and insignificant and scared. He was not accustomed to any of these things. The two brothers gazed at each other, and what passed between them Tony could not begin to say. Thor broke the stillness first, turning away from Loki with something that resembled heartbreak on his face.

"Will I ever be able to trust you again, Loki?" he said quietly.

Loki's smile was cruel. "You continue to imagine I care."

Thor cast him a last look over his shoulder before leaving without another word.

Tony gazed at Loki with a sinking heart. *This man is our ally*. "You don't have to be such an ass, you know," he said after a moment.

Loki looked at him as if he'd forgotten Tony was there. "I was being honest." He held out his hand, and the staff disappeared off the table to reappear in his grasp. "I will promise never to enter here without your permission again." He looked up the length of the gleaming weapon.

Though it hardly looked any different now, knowing what powered the staff gave it a whole new

appearance. Tony had read all about Thor's altercation with Malekith and the terrible destructive power of the Aether.

That it was right here, in Loki's hands, even only a part of it . . .

Loki's dark smile was back. "Have you finally remembered I am not a friend, Stark?"

Tony managed to suppress a shudder. "Trust me, I never forgot." *You won't let me.*

And he wondered if maybe these three 'dangerous enemies' of Loki's were only such a threat to him because they'd tag-teamed him, and that individually he was the worst of the lot.

And why, even with that knowledge, he still wanted to kiss the bastard right on his smirking mouth.

I think Tony's a masochist, lol.

Fifteenth Installment

Fifteenth Installment: Wounds That Run Deep

Steve thought it was best to inform SHIELD. Tony vehemently protested, stating he didn't want 'those controlling assholes' to send someone to 'bunk with him to babysit a deranged Norse god.' It was almost amusing to hear him rant, but Thor was in an ill enough humor he couldn't even smile. Natasha made a more pressing point.

"We already know how Loki feels about SHIELD," she said. "Now that he has such a dangerous weapon, I don't want to tempt him by offering cannon fodder."

Thor closed his eyes. His heart hurt. He felt weary with Loki's constant deceptions. Where was that clever, quick-witted child who could make adults stumble over their words as Loki talked himself and Thor out of trouble? Where was the mischievous boy with sparkling green eyes who took great delight in tricking others into doing something foolish? The one with a heart-meltingly sweet smile who could charm nearly anyone into anything?

He'd turned into a cold-eyed man with a cruel smile hiding vicious fangs. A man who could make a person weep from the venomous words dripping from his quicksilver tongue. Thor had never known anyone who could make an individual feel such a wide range of emotions. Pure, innocent love. Blinding rage. Anxiety. Fear. Regret. And soul-deep longing.

Thor longed for those peaceful times. He berated himself for a fool, but yearn he did.

"Until Loki reneges his promise to me, we will assume he means to keep his bargain," he said at length. "Natasha is right."

"Where is he, anyway?" Steve asked, looking around as if expecting the trickster to appear.

"Who knows," Tony grumbled. "He vanished in the middle of the night, informing me it was none of my damn business where he was going."

Thor shook his head. "It would have been best if I never involved you," he murmured, mostly to himself.

"Has the witch made any movements, Thor?" Steve asked.

The change in subject was welcome. Thor shook his head. "I have asked Heimdall to inform me if she comes anywhere near Midgard. She has not."

"Is she really that afraid of us?" Bruce asked quietly. "Does this seem odd to anyone else?"

Though Thor knew only a little Loki's capture and imprisonment, he did know the second escape had involved a nasty parting gift. "She has reason to advance with caution," he said. "Loki was alone before. But now he has me, and few people will dare challenge me." That wasn't pride talking. In fact, Thor viewed his battlefield prowess with mixed emotions.

Steve rose from the couch. "Director Fury asked me for an update. I don't want to lie, so what should I tell him?"

"Nothing," Tony replied, waving a hand. "Until we have something to tell him, just tell him nothing. Loki made a weapon. Unless he uses it against us, he has a right to defend himself. Right?"

He *is* an Avenger, even if none of us are happy about it."

Thor sighed. "Yes."

Natasha rose to follow the captain. "We'll see you tomorrow?"

Steve nodded as they headed to the elevator. "The director was talking about giving us an assignment of some sort. I get the feeling he wants to try Loki out."

"Swell," Tony muttered, tossing back whatever he was drinking.

Soon the rest of the Avengers were gone, which was fine. Thor perched on the edge of the chair opposite Tony. "I would have a moment of your time," he began.

Tony shrugged. "You can have all of them for the next hour if you want. Then I'm gonna go start working on the Mark XVI, but until then I'm all yours."

Thor folded his hands and then studied them. "You and Loki seem to have developed a rapport," he said.

Blinking, Tony sat up from his lazy sprawl. "Where's this going? Because I will run. Don't think I'm too old to run from a conversation."

Thor chuckled softly. "Nowhere dangerous. You seem able to interact casually and easily with him. Please do not hesitate to say no if what I'm about to ask makes you uncomfortable at all. But would you mind talking to Loki? Try to determine his motives? I have never before felt like I wasn't in control of a situation as I do now. Loki barely lets me begin before he shuts me out."

Tony paused, peering into Thor's eyes. "I'll try, buddy," he said, "but I can't promise. Loki's not exactly the type to share his feelings. Just because we enjoy a good verbal spar doesn't mean we're friends."

Thor searched Tony's face, a little surprised by what he saw. Tony almost certainly looked as if he was hiding something. Not something of which he was ashamed, but something he wanted no one else to know.

Well, Stark wasn't exactly an open book.

"That's all I ask," he said, dismissing his feeling. "I'm afraid I'm at a total loss. I have no idea how to mend the rift between us. I had thought when he came to me for help perhaps it meant we could begin anew. It's almost as if he . . ." He trailed off, not at all sure what he wanted to say.

After a moment, Tony finished for him. "He keeps intentionally reminding you not to trust him?"

Smiling ruefully, Thor looked up at the self-styled genius. "Yes. Actually, yes."

"Tell me about it," Tony muttered.

Loki would call him sentimental for trying, but Thor had gone through the heartbreak of Loki dying, turning up not dead but a mortal enemy, cutting the heartstrings binding them, and losing Loki again on the tail of an apology that had killed something in him.

Only to find him not dead, and while perhaps no longer a mortal enemy, nowhere near a friend or ally.

He no longer believed reconciliation was possible, but until he lost Loki for good or lost his own

life, he would keep trying.

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She sought him out. He'd been wondering when she would. Curious to say the least what she would say, Loki strolled through his dreamscape with no barriers in place to keep anyone out. He didn't wait long before she appeared, and when she did he smiled.

"You needn't take that false appearance with me, witch," he said. "I've seen you as you are. You should be proud of every scar and line on your face. They detail every chapter of your long, long life."

Her amber-orange eyes narrowed. "Was that your way of telling me you find my features unflattering?"

His smile became more of a smirk. "It was my way of telling you to be proud of your features."

She made a rude sound. "You knew I would come, so I won't mince words. You and I should not be enemies, Loki. We never should have been. I erred in my refusal to bargain with you."

Swirling color behind Loki rose up in a tree against which for him to lean. "We've been down this road, Æsa. You no longer have anything I want."

She smiled. "Not true. You seek all four Caskets, yes? You already procured the Casket of Eternal Flames. I have the Casket of Silent Storms. I will give it to you, in return for what I want."

Loki folded his arms, caught off guard. This, he hadn't been expecting. He didn't even know how she knew he wanted all four Caskets. Where in the Nine had she procured one? It had taken Loki months to track down the one he'd given to Hel.

But his curiosity was piqued, so he didn't dismiss her outright. "If you're asking for the location of the Aether in return, don't waste your breath."

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "No, I want the weapon you just made."

Loki let out a soft, mirthless laugh. *I suppose it shouldn't surprise me she knows of it already.* "Why would I do that?"

"I know you made a bargain with Hel, and that the Caskets are what you promised her," the witch said. "Therefore, you cannot refuse."

Loki gazed at her in silence for several moments. That wasn't true, which meant she didn't know much about his bargain with Hel. Good, let it stay that way. Hel wouldn't have told anyone, it was no one's business but hers what she'd asked of Loki. So the witch was guessing.

Still, Loki *did* want the Casket. It would be good enough to give Hel the information that Æsa had it, but it would be better to hand deliver it to the Guardian of Helheim, land of lost souls. So he made a great show of considering and looking reluctant.

"You understand I just barely finished making that staff. I created it to protect myself. Parting with it, even for the Casket, is difficult to fathom."

She took the bait, sidling closer to him with a smile he supposed was meant to look sultry. "Think of it, Loki. You could make another, could you not? I will further sweeten the deal by swearing neither I nor Thanos will trouble you again."

Though he wanted her to lower her guard, Loki did not allow her to touch him. "It wasn't easy to make a single one," he informed her coldly, "let alone a second. You lack the skill entirely, so you couldn't possibly understand."

Her face darkened in anger, but it smoothed quickly. "You're right. That is why I'm here. How many times will you make me grovel before you forgive me, Loki? I was wrong. I was *wrong*. I will admit it as many times as you care to hear it."

He looked down at her and smiled. "Your willingness to do so does appease me a bit," he lied. Then he sighed and shook his head. "And I confess, I would prefer we not continue as enemies. I will agree to this trade, but swear Surtr will also leave me alone. I did not steal from him, he has no business pursuing me."

"Done," she said. "He is too cowardly to go after you alone. Trust me, Loki. You will not regret this."

"How do you propose we do this?" Loki inquired. "You cannot come to Midgard. Heimdall will inform Thor and the Allfather the second that happens."

"There are many, many places where the Gatekeeper's eyes do not see," the witch said. "Do you know the Valley of Shadows?"

Loki managed not to roll his eyes. "Of course. As good a place as any to meet. I will bring my staff."

When she was gone, Loki brought up walls around his dreamscape to keep out any uninvited visitors. Only then did he allow himself to smile. *Fool witch*. He didn't trust her to keep her word, but it would be interesting to see how this all played out.

"Loki . . ."

Loki's heart did an odd flip in his chest. If he turned a little too quickly and eagerly to the sound of that voice, well, no one was around to see it. No one except her, and she certainly wouldn't judge or mock him.

Frigga's smile lit up her face as ever it had, her slender arms already open to embrace him. Loki went, obedient to her offer of affection. He rested his head against her neck, a sweet ache filling him. Though neither his body nor hers was physical here, this was his dreamscape and he could feel her. Here, he could touch her. She could touch him.

"I haven't seen you in several days, my darling," she murmured, fingers running through his ebony hair. "Have you been manufacturing a complicated way of protecting Midgard from her enemies?"

Loki smiled. All his defenses dropped, all the barriers of steel and ice melted away. It was a smile reserved for her alone. "I suppose," he replied.

Then for a long time, she simply held him. She sat on the color-shifting grass, and he lay down with his head pillowed on her lap. Her fingers threaded continuously through his hair, and a blissful contentment stole over him. She hummed, old lullabies from his childhood that had never failed to soothe him.

Eventually, she spoke. "Why do you not simply tell your brother what you did?" she asked gently. "You needn't hold him so far from your heart."

Loki's immediate reaction was gut-wrenching resistance, and he didn't open his eyes. Why didn't he

tell Thor his motives all those months ago on Earth?

"He will understand," Frigga went on, her voice so loving. Holding no judgment. "He still loves you. He will always love you. He's your brother, Loki."

To deny that would be to deny she was his mother. Something Loki had done once. They could have been the very last words he ever spoke to her.

He finally opened his eyes to look up at her. "I can't," he said, shaking his head. "I don't want to. I couldn't bear another moment of him treating me like that bright-eyed child who followed him everywhere and did all he asked. Thor doesn't see me as my own person, Mother. I am not his responsibility."

"He is not the same guileless lad who led you everywhere and was so careless with his words and actions," Frigga countered with a soft smile. "He would listen. You have but to ask."

How could he tell her he couldn't bear to ask? How could he tell her that he wanted Thor to just *know* why Loki was so angry and hurt? Why the resentment burned so deep? Why didn't Thor just acknowledge his younger brother as his equal without having to be *told*?

Frigga's slender hand smoothed down Loki's forehead, brushing over his eyes so they were closed once more.

"It is not for his sake I worry, my darling," she whispered. "Thor wears his heart on his sleeve. But you, my sweet Loki. You hide it away so none may know when they've pierced it. I cannot bear to see you deny yourself love."

"I do not deny yours," Loki said at once.

He felt her press a kiss to his forehead. "Nor should you. I am your mother."

Whether she had birthed him or not, she was the one he could never deny. The sweet silence fell again. Frigga was the one to break it again.

"You saved a great many lives," she said. "Perhaps all lives on Midgard."

"That wasn't my intent."

A quiet laugh. "You may lie to Thor or even yourself if you wish, but not to me. If you cared nothing for the lives you took, you would not have safeguarded them in death."

Loki drew in a long, slow breath and expelled it in a faint sigh. "I can't win against you."

Another laugh. Then, "Talk to Thor, my darling. Put both your pains to rest."

He said nothing. Not even Frigga could persuade him to do that.

Some pains ran too deep.

Sixteenth Installment

Sixteenth Installment: Deal With the Devil

Loki chose not to return to Stark Tower. In fact, he didn't return to Midgard at all. He made his way to the 'Valley of Shadow' around what would have been about four in the morning New York time. The valley, so named because of a lack of natural light, existed between the realms of Nilfheim and Jötunheim. It was a cold and silent place, the only living beings tiny little entities that gave off a pale gray light.

Mortals called them 'fairies' because they had no other name for them. They were in reality vicious little predators that would happily swarm those mortals and chew all the flesh off their bones in less than an hour. They found Loki and curiously buzzed him, but the scent of magic on his blood quickly warned them off.

Making a vague motion with his hand, he smiled when his new staff obediently materialized. It was a beautiful weapon. As soon as the cold metal touched his skin, he felt a pulse of excitement from the Aether.

Are we entering battle? she asked.

Loki snorted softly. "I'm afraid not, beloved," he murmured. "At least, not of a physical sort. I have something else entirely to ask of you."

A strong sense of curiosity and willingness to please.

He touched the black crystal globe, which made it flare with green light. In a rapid series of images, he showed her exactly what he was here to do and what he wanted of her. When he removed his hand, the green light flickered and faded, and he felt a confirmation. In fact, she seemed thrilled at the notion.

Then Loki spent time exploring his surroundings and laying a careful network of tiny wards. He would know the second the shadow witch approached him, he would know if she was alone, and he would know if she was armed with anything other than the promised Casket. He didn't wait long.

"Is this it?" Æsa's voice inquired.

Shadow coalesced into a form, and Loki gave her a small smirk. "Still pretending to be a young maiden?"

Her orange eyes narrowed. "You should never comment on a lady's age, *princeling*. It is no way to win her over."

"Fortunately, I neither have that desire nor inclination," Loki said, smooth as silk. "And yes, this is it."

The shadow witch flowed into his personal space, her eyes practically sparkling with avarice. "This is absolutely magnificent. I understand your desire not to be parted with it. And what is this metal? It's exquisite."

"I was sworn to secrecy," Loki said dryly, "so I cannot say. It was forged by the dwarves of Nidavellir, and let us say they were *very* proud of their craftsmanship."

"I can see why," she purred, reaching out.

It took a bit of effort not to pull the staff out of her reach. He let her touch, but he didn't let her take it. "Your promise?" he prompted.

She smiled, and a pillar of shadow rose beside her. On it rested one of the four Caskets. It looked nearly identical to the one resting in the vault in Asgard, but instead of ice blue swirling within, it was storm-cloud grey.

"The Casket of Silent Storms," she said. "As promised."

She even let him take it without releasing the staff to her. Loki was half tempted to see if he could manage to escape without turning it over, but he didn't. He held it out to her.

"Try not to break it," he said with a private smirk.

As if that was even possible.

Æsa's eyes glowed. "You will not regret this, Loki," she whispered, holding the staff in both hands and staring down at it. Their eyes met for a brief moment before she disappeared.

Loki closed his eyes and allowed a rare smile. *I will not regret it, witch, but I guarantee you will. You should have been a bit more careful in what you asked of me in return for the Casket.*

It wouldn't be long before the witch realized she was wholly unsatisfied with the deal she'd just made.

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"Would you protest if I planted a tracking unit on your wandering ass?" Tony inquired.

Loki's incredibly green eyes oriented on him, and he almost winced at the honeyed murder in them. "Would you protest if I shoved your head up yours?"

Tony couldn't help the bark of laughter. "Wow. What an uncommonly *human* rebuttal."

Loki looked absurdly pleased. "I have been practicing. It amuses me, the unintelligent way you insects communicate."

Jesus, three mean insults all in one smooth sentence. Tony prided himself on his quick wit, but this guy had a dozen razors for a tongue instead of one. He winced even as he grinned. "You are one nasty guy, you know that?"

Loki made a soft sound that might have been amusement or pique, turning back to the ridiculously fat book he was reading.

Wherever the hell he'd gotten it. Tony didn't have dusty old tomes in his Tower. He plopped down opposite the Norse god. "So, gonna tell me where you've been these last two days? And why your staff magically disappeared from my lab?"

"No," came the short reply.

Well. That was that. Said Tony never. "Oh, come on. You've obviously been up to something devious and clever. Where's the fun in that if you don't *share*? Don't you want people to be *amazed* by your brilliance?"

That earned him another look, this one glittering with more mischief than malice. "No, Stark. I am not Thor."

Geez, another zinger. Tony chuckled, shaking his head. "What's got you in such a mood?"

Something pleasant settled in Loki's countenance. The expression of a man enjoying himself. It made him look younger and even sexier. "It was nice to get away. What on Earth do you humans do all day? Sit around and ponder how dull your lives are?"

"As opposed to plotting world destruction?"

"Domination," Loki correctly immediately. "And I wouldn't say it was me plotting that."

Whoa, what? Tony saw an opening and took it. "That was a loaded comment. Care to explain?"

"Not particularly."

Of course. "C'mon, princess. It's me, your favorite brilliant, billionaire Avenger. You can tell me. Just a clue?"

The good humor disappeared from Loki's face, and he closed his book with a hefty thump. "Why this interest, Stark?"

He didn't sound angry. He sounded irritated and maybe even a bit defensive. And more than a little weary. How peculiar. "Hey, I like you," Tony said. It didn't feel as weird to admit that out loud as he'd have thought. "I can't help it. You're mean and funny and smart as hell and dangerous, and it's fun kissing you." That last with a wink.

Which garnered nothing more than a snort. "And you, apparently, are more than a little cracked in the head."

"More human insults! You're on a roll."

Some of the good humor returned. "I'm afraid your insanity is not any kind of incentive for me to bare my soul."

"I have it on good authority that talking is good for the complexion," Tony coaxed. "Maybe if you get it out of your system, you won't walk around like you've got the world's biggest stick shoved up your ass."

Loki's eyes wavered between anger and mirth. He was trying to decide whether to chuckle or murder the human, Tony could see it. He was either in too good a mood or too lazy for murder, because he just huffed a soft laugh.

"I rue the day I let Thor force me into the Avengers. My bargain with him prevents me from summoning crows to peck your eyes from your skull."

There was no real venom in his voice, so Tony stayed relaxed and went back to luring Loki out of his emotional shell. This time he did it from Loki's side on the couch instead of opposite him on the chair. Really, there didn't need to be so much space between them.

"Seriously, princess. You can tell ol' Stark. I won't judge. Hell, I'm pretty sure no one's more understanding than me. It's *me*."

Loki displayed not an iota of discomfort at having Tony so close. His expression was rather

insulting, though. It looked like he was examining a bug under a microscope, having found it displaying unusual behaviors.

"What would I gain by digging up the past, Stark? For that matter, what have you to gain by listening?"

Tony lifted one shoulder in a lazy shrug. "That's what friends do for each other. Don't you have any friends?"

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. Loki's eyes shuttered, and his posture subtly changed. He was closing Tony out. "Sentiment is a refuge of the weak," he said, voice now cold as winter. His uncoiling legs told of his intent to get up and probably leave.

For some reason, Tony just *knew* he couldn't allow that. He lunged up from his position and planted one hand on the back of the couch and the other on the arm, effectively hemming Loki in. Then, before his brain could catch up with his instincts, he swooped down and planted his mouth on Loki's.

The reaction was instantaneous, and though Loki hardly moved, Tony suddenly felt like he was falling into a void of ravenous sharks. Then he blinked and the impression passed. Loki was looking at him, eyes filled with something darker than amusement but not quite homicide.

"The liberties you take with me . . ."

It was little more than a breath, softer even than a whisper. The words ghosted across Tony's lips, and he felt it was safe to move. He leaned down slower this time, giving his partner a chance to pull away. For a few fleeting moments, he thought Loki might. But with the tiniest movement forward he encouraged Tony to close the distance.

Their lips met softly, much more softly than their first kiss. It was almost chaste. Tony lightly nibbled across Loki's closed lips, planting a feather-light kiss on the corner of his mouth before backing off to once more peer into gleaming verdant eyes.

Loki's expression had mellowed, but he still looked far from pleased.

I can't believe he's letting me do this. "I got your back," he said quietly. "Okay?"

Something flickered in Loki's eyes, but it was gone too quickly for Tony to define. A smirk blossomed on the god's unfairly sexy face. "You are a walking conundrum, Stark. At least I'm never bored."

Tony thought that was a good invitation to kiss him again, but this time Loki didn't allow it. His smirk didn't diminish as he vanished in a green mist to reappear a few feet away. Tony flopped onto the couch with a disappointed scowl.

"That's not playing fair."

"When did I ever give the impression I would play *fair*?" Loki teased. "I have something to see to right now. Would you please inform the good Captain I would like to speak with him? I should be back tomorrow morning. I would like all my fellow Avengers present." That last with a tiny, wicked grin.

Tony felt something dangerously close to arousal coiling in his gut. *Did he put some sort of curse on me? I mean, there's such a thing as playing with fire, and then there's just plain sticking your nuts in a guillotine.*

"Sure thing, princess. What should I tell him?"

"That if he isn't there, I will set off on my own and do something SHIELD wouldn't like." Now his smile was just mean.

Tony wanted to kiss him even more. "Sure. Insane bastard."

Loki looked contemplatively at the top of Tony's head. "Pink really is a becoming color on you, Stark."

"You wouldn't!" Tony gasped, already looking around for a mirror.

This time, laughter followed the green mist, and Tony was alone. He shook his head, grinning.

"Evil bastard."

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"It doesn't work."

"What do you mean, it doesn't work?"

"It doesn't work. No matter what I do, the staff does nothing. I can't channel the Aether. From what I can tell, there is no spell or enchantment preventing me from using it. And yet, I can't use it."

"Are you certain you aren't merely too weak?"

"I am not some wet-behind-the-ears warrior maiden, Mad Titan. I have been alive longer than Odin. I know how to use a magical weapon. This one doesn't work."

"And you are sure the little snake didn't simply put a binding spell on it so you can't use it?"

"I'm positive. I would have discovered it by now. It's as though I'm holding a pretty lump of metal and crystal with no special properties at all. Aside from looking magnificent, this is useless to me!"

A cold laugh. "What exactly did you bargain for?"

"I gave him the Casket for his staff."

"And that is all?"

"Yes. What are you getting at?"

"So you knew you were bargaining with the silvertongue, and you didn't make sure your terms were more specific than him simply handing over his staff?"

A pause. "I don't see where you're going with this."

A grin like a frozen wasteland. "I spent many months with that Aesir boy in my keeping. I came to know him better than you do, I assure you. A conversation with him is like a game of chess. He never makes a move without having already planned the next twelve moves, and having anticipated all possible responses. Where I'm going with this, Shadow Witch, is that you were outsmarted. You gave him your one bargaining chip and didn't even make Loki swear he wouldn't come to reclaim his staff. You are a fool, and fools are useless to me."

"What! How dare you—!"

"Spare me. And trust me in this. You have not heard the last of him. Since you clearly have yet to grasp the scope of this, you and I are through."

"Don't you take one step away from me, Mad Titan. May I remind you I am the one who captured Loki twice? What hand had you in that?"

"None, and because of that twice did he escape. The last time nearly ended you. But thank you for your services. I have learned much from you. Including what I most needed to know. You aren't a match for Loki Odinson. He will come for you, fool witch. And when he does, you will die."

Seventeenth Installment

Seventeenth Installment: Loki, the Avenger

Tony couldn't sleep. He *hated* it when he couldn't sleep. It happened too often for his liking and ensured he wasn't a morning person. Most of his sleeping occurred between four and eleven a.m., so getting up early was painful.

Tomorrow morning, Loki wanted to talk to the Avengers. It was bothering him. What could the god want? And what about Fury, wanting to give them some sort of test? Thanks to Loki continuously vanishing off to places unknown, the Director was getting itchy.

But the icing on this fabulous cake was the desire. Tony had gone from wanting the bastard as far away as possible to wanting him to stick around to wanting to kiss him to wanting *way* more inappropriate things. Things that would probably get him killed for thinking them.

"Damn it, Loki," he hissed, frustration stirring in his gut.

"Mm, taking my name in vain?"

Tony shot up, reaching for the bedside lamp with a pounding heart. It flared with soft gold light at his touch, gently illuminating the room and its two occupants.

There was something different about Loki. His eyes were brighter than usual, his countenance darker. Shadows danced over his face, interesting and somehow alluring. He was here for a reason. He wanted something, it was plain.

But what he wanted . . . Tony swallowed and resisted the urge to pull the covers over his head. *He's either here to kill me or turn me into a rat.*

"Wha . . ." he cleared his throat and tried again. "Mind telling me what you're doing in my bedroom at two in the fucking morning?"

Loki flowed out of the chair near the wardrobe, somehow looking like liquid shadows. "To give you what you've been not-so-subtly demanding for the last week," he said in a low, velvet tone.

It brought Tony up short. *Whoa . . . what—? Bedroom voice?* Then it clicked. It wasn't murder in those eyes, it was more like a darkly smoldering promise. *Shit, really? He's gonna—?* He swallowed again, this time for altogether different reasons. Instantly the temperature of the room seemed to rise by ten degrees.

"How did you get in here without alerting Jarvis?" he demanded.

"Easily," Loki said, looking amused. "We've been over this."

He stopped by the edge of the bed, and Tony decided it was *really* unfair he was already naked and Loki was wearing those damn snug jeans and dark sweater.

"Yeah, but I still don't like it when people sneak up on me," Tony grumbled, his body already moving. He reached up to grab Loki and pull him onto the bed.

Because he'd already established he was insane. Best go with the flow. Even if it would probably lead straight to eternal damnation.

A soft laugh, then Tony blinked in confusion. He was somehow lying flat on his back, arms up over his head and unable to move them.

"What the fuck, princess?" he growled, tugging with all his strength.

Not a millimeter of give. "Keep your hands to yourself," Loki chided, looking plenty pleased with himself. "You started this, now you're going to give me what I want."

After that, Tony lost his mind. It was a peculiar feeling. Different from insanity. It felt like he'd been robbed of the ability to breathe, and every heaving breath was a conscious effort. When he didn't focus on it, his lungs simply stopped working.

Heat. Loki's body was far warmer than Tony had ever imagined. Skin. His skin was even smoother than Tony had dreamed. Moisture. Perspiration made them slide together with slick ease. Faint, pleased gasps from Loki. He wasn't loud. Tony knew he wouldn't be loud. He was almost silent, and Tony found himself literally aching to hear him moan.

But oh . . . sweet depths of madness and chaos, watching him was the single most incredible sight Tony had ever witnessed, and he'd seen plenty of people caught up in ecstasy. This was different than all of those.

It could be the way his eyes, made black by the dim lighting, gazed down at Tony, smugly pleased he couldn't move. It could be the way the light glinted off diamonds of moisture on his skin. It could be the striking contrast between the white skin of his neck and ebony length of his hair, which clung to his jaw and throat in a manner most enticing. It could be that he couldn't touch when he so desperately wanted to.

Or it could be that this was *Loki*, the God of Mischief and Chaos, obviously enjoying himself and not giving a flying fuck about the human he was currently using.

Strangely, Tony didn't give a flying fuck, either. Normally during sex he cared a lot about his own needs. Right now all he could think was, *Yeah, use me. Enjoy yourself. You look so fucking beautiful right now.* He didn't speak. He was seriously worried Loki would rip his tongue out of his mouth.

Or stop this. *Fuck, no. I'd rather lose my tongue than stop this.*

Loki's slender hands splayed on Tony's chest, only the faintest hint of a flush high on his cheeks. His body moved in a manner so sinuous and graceful it was ridiculous. Sex was messy and awkward. So how could Loki still look so goddamned perfect? He looked like a goddess . . . and Tony didn't bother correcting that faux pas.

Then Loki's body grew tense, his breath hitched in his throat, the muscles of his belly tightened, and a shudder ran up his slim frame. His grimace, almost looking pained, was a beautiful tell of orgasm before his body began to relax, but Tony felt no liquid heat blossom between them.

He frowned, confused even amidst his own frantic need for release. "Loki—?"

Then Loki moved off him. At Tony's near wail of protest, he just smirked. "Did you think I would let you come inside me?" he whispered. "Don't fear, Stark. I won't leave you like this." He slid down Tony's body, coming to a halt with his mouth dangerously close to the human's groin.

Tony's heart stopped. *Is he gonna—?* That was almost as good as the alternative.

But no. Loki gave him a wicked grin, taking in a slow breath. Then he slowly exhaled, and pale

green mist flowed from his lips. Tony's body went rigid, vision whitening out at the unexpected pleasure. It felt like orgasm had lit up every single nerve ending in his body, an all-over orgasm that wiped the world away.

When it finally passed, Tony flopped down on the bed, utterly boneless and spent. He felt the bed dip with Loki's weight when the god shifted. Tired as he might be, he still reached out and grabbed Loki. Maybe the Aesir wasn't expecting it, because he fell against Tony's chest with a faint grunt. Glad he had use of his arms again, Tony nuzzled the damp black hair now beneath his nose.

"Where you goin'?" he slurred.

So he liked to cuddle after sex. More shocking, Loki relaxed and let him. He turned to press his cheek against Tony's chest, draping an arm across his waist.

"One day I will grow weary of asking myself why I let you get away with so much," he murmured, lips tickling Tony's skin, "and simply kill you."

Tony chuckled, feeling drunk on pleasure and Loki. Best damn feeling of his life. "Okay. But not tonight, 'kay?"

"Hmmm," Loki purred.

And this time, Tony didn't have trouble sleeping. As he drifted off, his last thought was of regret that they hadn't kissed so much as once.

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Thor did not recognize the expression on Loki's face when the Avengers had gathered as per his request. The younger Odinson looked . . . well, Thor couldn't quite say. There were hints of self-satisfaction, but there was much more to it. Something darker, more fervent.

And for that matter, Thor couldn't quite define what he saw on Tony Stark's face, either. The human's emotions seemed to be complicated, containing disappointment and . . . chagrin? The rest of the Avengers just looked wary.

They all sat down at what Tony had (only half joking) labeled the war table. Loki didn't sit, opting to stand and face them. Steve had quietly asked Thor earlier this morning if he could do all the talking and Thor just observe. The fact that his human friends were so affected by his quarrels with Loki was shaming.

He'd agreed. And he would stick to it, no matter how Loki tried to rile him.

"Thank you for your attention," Loki said, sounding anything but grateful. "I'm sure you noticed my staff is gone from Stark's lab."

"Tony mentioned it," the captain confirmed.

Loki gave a cold imitation of a smile. "I thought you deserved to know what happened to it. I gave it to the witch. Now that I have a means of tracking her, I am planning to go after her. I'll be leaving tomorrow."

Stunned silence greeted that announcement. Thor had to bite his tongue. *Do you enjoy throwing people off balance, brother?*

Dr. Banner recovered first. "You gave it to her so you could use it to track her?"

Loki's smile remained cold. "It was a bit of an improvised plan, but yes."

"I need to know more than that," Steve said, not quite a command but definitely not a request.

Thor silently agreed, willing his brother to cooperate for once.

Loki surprised him by obeying. "She had something I wanted, she offered it to me in exchange for my staff."

No less cryptic than usual, of course.

"More than that," Steve repeated, this time more like a command.

Now Loki looked mildly put-upon. "She had the Casket of Silent Storms." He looked at Thor. "That is what she gave to me."

"Then you bargained with her," Thor said flatly. Promises aside, the good captain simply wouldn't understand the significance of that. "You cannot go after her to retake something you gave to her as part of a bargain, Loki."

Walls of ice rose up behind Loki's green eyes. Frigid anger and again, something else Thor could not define. "I am not going after her to retake the staff, Thor. I will face her and end this. Once and for all."

Thor could practically feel his hackles rising. "If you argue semantics, so may she."

"I am not asking your permission," Loki said scorn audible. "I am stating my intentions."

Thor wanted to grab Loki and shake him.

Steve cleared his throat, giving Thor a meaningful look. "I'm sorry, Loki," he said, even sounding contrite, "but I need more to go on than your half-answers. You're asking us to commit to a private war. I think it's only fair you tell us the whole truth. Of everything."

Another smile curved Loki's lips, this one caustic. "Everything is a big word, Captain. It would take me the rest of your pathetically short lives to tell you the truth of *everything*."

"Loki," Thor snapped.

Steve held up a hand. "It's all right, Thor. I should have been more specific. I'm sorry," he said to Loki again, "let me rephrase. I'd like to know the truth of your actions nine months ago during the incidents with the Chitauri, your actions since then, and the details of this new deal you made with the shadow witch."

Thor didn't think Steve had any reason to apologize, but he definitely approved of the man's patience and specificity. With Loki, gray areas tended to be hazy and all but invisible.

While Thor may approve, Loki obviously did not. Though his countenance didn't change, Thor could sense the anger rising up in his brother.

"I will not indulge your curiosity," he said in a glacial tone.

"This isn't about curiosity," Steve said, still calm. "This is about knowing whether we can trust you or not. Being an Avenger isn't about labels. It's about actions and intentions. You have never once revealed yours, and we can't work with you like this. I don't even know if you're an ally or an enemy."

Loki's rigid posture spoke volumes of his displeasure. Thor watched his younger brother, wishing he could hear what was going through Loki's mind right now. *Why are you so resistant, brother? What is it you so desperately seek to hide? Why can you not simply open up to us? To me?* He swallowed his own pride.

"I will leave if you wish, Loki."

That earned him a heated glare. "I am not a child, Thor."

"I know that," Thor agreed, a little confused by the way Loki never reacted in the way the elder expected. Most of the time he couldn't even tell where Loki's anger was directed.

"Do you actually want people to think poorly of you?" Tony asked, his voice less flippant than usual.

Loki's throat worked as if he'd swallowed a mouthful of glass.

"Do this one thing for us, Loki," Natasha said, "and we'll do everything we can for you. Seems like a fair bargain, right?"

Loki turned away from them, beginning to pace like a caged animal. Thor suddenly recognized that undefined emotion in Loki's eyes. Pain. Feeling like his heart would break again, he stood up. His brother hadn't seemed to notice, he actually started when Thor put a large hand on his shoulder.

"Come," he said, both firm and gentle. He gave his fellow Avengers an apologetic look. "I am sorry. I will return shortly."

Though Loki didn't resist, as soon as they were alone he wrenched his arm free with murder in his eyes. "The way you treat me isn't patronizing enough, Thor? Now you drag me away like a child throwing a tantrum?"

For once, Thor didn't let Loki's anger rile him. "Not at all," he said softly. "I didn't stop to think about the position into which I've put you."

"You rarely stop to think at all," Loki retorted, but it lacked the usual venom.

Thor didn't speak, just looked at him.

Then finally, *finally* Loki relented. His whole posture changed. He appeared to cave in on himself, and he looked smaller and younger than he had in . . . centuries, probably. Loki always carried himself with squared shoulders and an arrogant tilt to his chin, making him appear even taller than he actually was. It was a jarring change.

"Fine. *Fine*. But you will never speak of this again once I'm done."

"If you wish," Thor agreed.

Eighteenth Installment

Eighteenth Installment: Intentions and Wounds

He wondered, sometimes, what it was like to be burned alive. Or boiled alive. His random musings had sometimes been dark and morbid as a child. Now, he supposed he knew the answer. Falling off the rainbow bridge and landing in the unwelcoming arms of Yggdrasil was probably worse than anything he could dream up.

How long? How long had it been since the one who called himself Mad Titan had found Loki? Half mad from pain and loss and knowing and unknowing? From visions that swarmed like angry insects, from raw energy, from seeing things he was not meant to see, from knowing things he was never meant to know. From hearing things that could not be heard.

Mad Titan had promised he could help Loki. Loki wasn't sure this was help. He was fairly certain the strange one named Thanos was actually making him worse. But in its way, it was exactly what Loki needed. No, no that was wrong to say. He provided what Loki needed, maybe. But this strange torture gave Loki something to focus on when he was losing his mind. A soft laugh.

No, he'd already lost it.

You're almost ready, Mad Titan kept saying. You'll fight for me. Won't you, Loki.

And Loki said yes, because he thought Thanos was asking him something else. Then he laughed because he couldn't help it.

Was this torture? Could it be called that? Or was this simply being driven to the very brink of sanity, seeing the madness into which he was about to descend, and trying desperately to claw away?

There was a strange, scratchy-voiced man . . . thing . . . who called himself Other. Other thought Loki was a rabid dog who needed to be put down. Loki laughed at that, too. No, he said. No, you can't catch what I have because you would have to climb into Yggdrasil. But his lips didn't move, so Other ignored him.

That was fine. If they kept talking, Loki would laugh again because Other talked as if he had something intelligent to say. He thought he was threatening. He looked like a bug next to Thanos.

But somewhere in the dizzying, nauseating swirl of colors and voices and pictures in his mind, he heard Mad Titan and Other talking about Midgard. Doorways. Like the Bifrost. Different. The same. What did it matter? Doorways to realms outside Yggdrasil. For some reason, the very idea was jarring to Loki. Not because he didn't know they existed, but because the madness of Yggdrasil somehow protested the notion.

Wrong.

Was it wrong?

No.

But it was.

And it wasn't the only thing they talked about. Midgard was special. It was a world and a realm. It

was a place that had doors that could open to worlds outside the branches of Yggdrasil. It was the only place with such doors. Loki found that interesting. Knowledge always interested him. It held the madness at bay long enough for him to learn. And the things he learned probably would have terrified him . . . if he still had the sanity to be afraid.

Thanos talked about her. After he was sure Loki's mind was well and truly his. He talked about a being he simply called Death. She had roamed the realms, all of them, free and unchecked. Mad Titan met her, served her, and came to love her. His love for her bordered on madness. But a war with Borr and a young Odin had cast her from Yggdrasil, sealing all the doors.

Somehow, it didn't surprise Loki to hear this. But Thanos did manage to surprise him when he stopped saying, You're almost ready and started saying, You're ready.

There was an army. An army from far away. A vulgar people called Chitauri. Violent and nearly mindless. They were led by Other. They didn't impress Loki. But Thanos told Loki he would lead them and conquer Midgard.

Even amidst the complete chaos in his mind, Loki knew Mad Titan was hiding something. So he fought the chaos to learn. Knowledge was power. Knowledge was always power. Except, maybe, the knowledge of all Yggdrasil. That was only madness. Color that never stopped, voices that never ceased, visions that swirled in a senseless blend.

No. Stop.

He had to know what Mad Titan was hiding. Loki would not be anyone's tool. He might not be in control of his own mind any longer, but damned if he would let anyone else control it. So he listened. It was hard. It was hard to stop laughing.

Then it started making sense. The Mad Titan loved Death. He wanted to control Midgard because then he could control the doorways. If he could control the doorways, he could bring Death back to the Nine. He would have no use for the foolish, pathetic humans dwelling in Midgard. They would be slaughtered.

And what would Death do when she returned? Pay a visit to Asgard? To the Allfather who had sealed her away to begin with? Loki was nearly spent spiraling back down into madness just with the thought. It was funny. Was it frightening? Why couldn't he make any sense of his own thoughts?

No. No. He couldn't let this happen. Somehow, that was wrong. Stop. He had to stop it.

And with purpose, came clarity. The veil over his mind didn't lift, but the edges did part enough for him to focus. Death and Mad Titan would destroy more than just humanity. They would destroy all life in the Nine.

So Loki allowed himself to give in to Mad Titan's torturous persuasion. It gave him the freedom to slip away. He sought out the one who could help him. Hel was in exactly the right position to help him, and he struck his bargain.

oOo

"I don't understand," Thor said when Loki finally fell silent. "You went to Helheim to strike a bargain with Hel. What were you trying to accomplish?"

Loki stared at the wall directly in front of him. It was more painful than expected, telling all this. Words were not simply pretty things he wove together in some sort of tapestry. They were living

things on his tongue, submersing him in the memories. Thanos hadn't just abused Loki's physical body. That would have been far too easy. No, he'd tormented his mind.

"Give me a moment," he hissed, closing his eyes for a few heartbeats. "I'm not just telling a story. You're forcing me to relive it."

Thor subsided.

Loki opened his eyes and straightened. "I went to Helheim. I knew Hel was the only one who could help me. I . . ." He nearly swallowed his tongue. Why was this so hard? "I couldn't flee Thanos. I couldn't simply pretend I hadn't heard what I heard." Though he'd wanted to. Not out of fear . . .

But because the madness was just so damn *big*. It had constantly threatened to overwhelm him.

"I knew I had to prevent Thanos from accomplishing his goal. But there wasn't any way for me to do that. I wasn't in any condition to fight him." He'd barely been able to speak his own name. "I could only heal if I was away from him. Once he trusted me, I went to Midgard to do as he asked. To conquer it."

"Wha -" Thor began.

Loki cut him off with another glare. "I knew you would come if I tried. I made sure to make a splash." A cold smile. "I made sure you knew where I was and what I planned right away. Why else do you think I would bother with such a ridiculous plan?"

Thor had the decency to look sheepish. It helped calm Loki.

"So you made sure we would defeat you," Thor said. "Why did you kill so many?"

Loki took a slow, deep breath. "I had to make it look convincing, didn't I? Otherwise Thanos would simply have killed me and come in my place. And trust me, he wouldn't have hatched a plan to draw the attention of Midgard's great defender." Spoken with no small amount of scorn.

Thor looked like he wanted to say something about that. Loki saw him grind his teeth. "What about this bargain you made with Hel?" he demanded. "What part does that play in this?"

"None," Loki snapped. "My bargain with her is none of your business."

"You swore you would tell me everything," Thor said. "Everything, Loki."

For several seconds, the power of Loki's anger sealed his tongue. Then he turned away.

o0o

"Loki Odinson. My, but the youngest son of Odin has come a very long way. Tell me; what can I, the humble guardian of the underworld, do for you?"

"Hel," Loki said, giving her the very slightest hint of a bow. His voice sounded mocking. He didn't mean for it to, but he couldn't help it. He mocked everything. "I have come to you with a disturbing insight."

"Disturbing insight?" Hel repeated, smiling faintly. "How interesting. My curiosity is certainly piqued."

He asked her about Mad Titan. She knew of him, though they'd never met. He asked her if she knew of Lady Death.

"Of course," Hel said, "though only by reputation. She was banished from the Nine by King Borr before I came to preside over Helheim."

"The Mad Titan wants to bring her back."

Hel raised an eyebrow.

"He plans to use me as his foot soldier," Loki told her. "I have other plans."

She smiled. "Tell me."

"I'm going to do as he asks. Not in precisely the way he wants. I plan to fail." He laughed, because he simply couldn't help it. Didn't want to. He stopped abruptly. "But I have to do something I don't want to."

"What would that be?" Hel asked, frowning.

"I can't descend to Midgard a merciful god," Loki told her. "I must appear to be Mad Titan's faithful harbinger of doom." This time, his laugh was spite and not madness.

"Then why have you come here?" Hel asked. "What can I possibly do?"

"I . . ." Loki faltered. Then he swallowed back the madness. It was harder than it used to be. "I want to make a bargain with you."

"A bargain? With me?"

"Yes," Loki replied. "Lives will be lost. Human lives . . ." with a dose of scorn . . . "but innocent. I would ask you to save them."

"Save them? How? Ensure they don't die?"

"No," Loki said. "Mad Titan will know."

She waited for him to continue, looking more intrigued.

"Everyone who dies because of what I'm about to do . . ." Loki began. "Send their souls to be born again in Asgard."

Hel blinked. "This would be a tremendous feat on my part," she said slowly, "but, I believe any human would be thrilled to be born an Aesir." A smile formed. "It will require significant compensation."

Loki simply nodded. "I expected as much."

"You've proven to be exceedingly clever," Hel said. "Bring me the four Caskets."

This time, his laughter was pure madness. "All four? I asked but one thing of you."

She waved a hand, dismissive. "Two of them, then. Bring me the other two, and I will consider myself owing you two favors. This is my price. Do we have a bargain, Loki Odinson?"

Don't call me that. Odin cast me away. Loki didn't speak that aloud. Knowing his grin must look insanity incarnate, he held out a hand. "We have a bargain."

This time when Loki stopped speaking, Thor could barely think. His mind, which had been racing through this entire strange tale, came to a stuttering halt. "*That* was what you asked of her?" he finally asked. "To . . . *mollify* the dead by sending them to Asgard to be born again?"

His brother's lips curled in a faint mockery of a smile. "I wouldn't call it that."

Thor hadn't thought he would never understand his brother's actions. "You have never hidden that you find yourself superior to humans. You expect me to believe you were watching out for them?"

"We *are* superior to humans," Loki said in a gratingly patronizing voice. "My feelings on that don't mean I automatically wish to destroy them. You find yourself superior to dogs, and yet you have no genocidal tendencies toward them. It is the same for me."

"Humans are not dogs," Thor growled.

Loki smiled. It was frigid, utterly without warmth. "No. Dogs are intelligent and clever."

"Loki—"

His brother waved a slender hand. "You demanded this of me, Thor. Do not sit in judgment. I had no choice. If it wasn't me, it would have been Thanos. Would you have preferred that? That the Mad Titan descend into Midgard? He would have slaughtered all of them before you even knew of his presence. I had no choice. What would *you* have done differently, *noble* son of Odin?"

Now his lips were curled in an ugly sneer.

Thor wanted to say he would have challenged Thanos himself. But a quiet voice in the back of his mind whispered, *Could you have succeeded? Alone? Lost in a place with sanity stretched so thin there was hardly aught of you left?* Loki had painted a painfully vivid picture of his madness in the branches of Yggdrasil.

Thor couldn't even imagine what that must have been like. In fact, he could barely imagine how Loki had survived at all. It was why watching him fall had been so heartbreaking. Loki *shouldn't* have survived. He should have died.

And in another moment of brutal honesty, most humans would leap on the chance to cast off their mortal bodies and assume that of the Aesir. Humans were fragile and so very short-lived. Aesir were strong and lived very long lives.

It was almost a gift.

If offered, the humans Loki had killed probably would have taken the deal anyway.

Even amidst his own madness and pain, Loki had still not wanted to thoughtlessly destroy lives. He knew he had to kill them to ensure Thanos suspected nothing, but he made sure they didn't suffer needlessly. He offered them recompense.

"Loki—" he began again.

"Don't," Loki instantly cut him off. "Do *not* offer me your pity and compassion, Thor. I want neither."

"What do you want, brother?" Thor asked softly.

"From you?" Loki spat. "Nothing. It would please me well if I *never* saw you again. When the

Chitauri were defeated, I had intended to vanish. Being captured and dragged back to Asgard in chains was never part of my plan."

Thor felt the walls he'd been building up where Loki was concerned beginning to crumble. That quiet voice went on with its insidious whispering: *Would you have been able to craft such a plan? One that would fool Thanos, warn humanity of the dangers awaiting them, and somehow save all those who would die from your actions?*

No. Thor acted, and he rarely thought a single step past his decision to act. He shook his head. "Why didn't you just tell me?" he all but whispered. "None of this would have happened, Loki."

Loki looked at him as if he was an utter idiot. "And what would you have done, Thor? You certainly would not have fought me in earnest. You would have given yourself away, because you are a fool. Thanos would have known I was not under his control, and all I did would have been for naught."

Thor took a step toward his brother. Loki matched him with one step backward. His verdant eyes flashed with warning.

My walls crumble and his grow higher. So, for the first time in his life, Thor yielded to Loki. "You're right," he murmured. "I am a fool. I couldn't have done what you did, and there *wasn't* a better way. I am sorry, little brother. I've judged you harshly for something I didn't understand. I'm so sorry."

Loki tensed. "I don't want your contrition, either," he snapped, but with less venom than before.

"You have it nonetheless," Thor insisted, still soft, still low. He felt something he'd not felt in far too long. Warm, warm love. Love for the clever little brother who was so, *so* much more intelligent than even Thor had supposed.

Visibly swallowing, Loki took another step back. Then he let out a sound almost like the growl of a wounded animal. "This is ridiculous." He stalked to the door.

He had to pass close to Thor to get there, and his hand snaked out to grab Loki's wrist. He wrenched his little brother up against his chest, felt slim hands try to push him back, held him tighter.

"I know now," he whispered into Loki's ebony hair, "that you are not—and have never been—my enemy. You're my brother, Loki. I swear to you, I will never forget again."

The younger made a sound Thor could not identify. Somewhat like a snarl, not quite a sob; a wounded, broken sound that made Thor crush Loki to him, a hand clenching in soft black hair.

"I'm sorry, little brother. For everything I did that drove you away from me. I'm sorry. So, so sorry."

oOo

Loki felt like he was breaking. He was falling apart in Thor's impossibly strong embrace, and it was absurdly similar to the madness that had swallowed him in Yggdrasil. He couldn't breathe. He wanted to slit Thor's throat if it meant his idiot brother *let go of him*.

And yet, he was clinging to Thor. Like a stupid child. His eyes were beginning to burn, and to his horror he realized he was a breath away from bursting into tears. Heaving in a desperate breath, he summoned every last ounce of strength he still possessed and teleported himself across the room.

With distance, he managed to regain a bit of equilibrium.

"Do not attach your sentiment to me," he hissed. This time when he pushed past Thor, the fool let him.

As he left, he heard his brother murmur, "I understand you're not ready to accept me right now, brother. I will wait until you are."

Nineteenth Installment

Heartbreaking last installment, I know. T^T

I suspect the heartbreak will continue. I should have put up a warning of ANGST.

This chapter is short, I just needed a gateway to the action.

Nineteenth Installment: Aftermath

Tony woke up alone that morning. When it was just a fling with a random person to have a little fun, he didn't care much. Preferable, really. But Loki was so much more than a fling, a random person, or a little fun. And Tony was beginning to wonder what he wanted from the emerald-eyed god, and why it made him so mad that he woke to find his bed empty.

Seeing Loki later in the morning was even worse. Loki didn't acknowledge him in any changed sort of way. This indifference rankled. Tony managed to corner him.

"Why weren't you there this morning?" he demanded.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Why on earth would I be, Stark?" Then, at Tony's look of wounded irritation, he smiled. "Please don't tell me you thought anything of that? I had an itch, Stark. I scratched it."

Yeah, that pissed Tony off way more than Loki hiding shit about his motives for ancient history. He wanted to talk about last night. It was all he could think about while Thor and Loki were gone and the rest of the Avengers waited.

"Something bothering you?" Natasha asked, appearing by his side from nowhere.

"Nothing I wanna talk about," Tony snapped, peevish and not really understanding why. *It's not like I'm in love with him.*

"Is this wait driving anyone else crazy?" Bruce said abruptly.

The door opened. Thor strode in, alone. He looked deeply troubled.

"Where's Loki?" Steve asked.

Thor shook his head and sank down into one of the free chairs. "He won't be returning this evening. I . . ." he broke off, running a hand over his face. "I should not have put him through that. Had I known the terrible cost . . ."

"He talked?" Steve said, sitting up straighter and leaning forward.

"He told me everything," Thor confirmed.

Judging from his expression, the god of thunder would have preferred ignorance. And didn't that just make Tony's curiosity spike.

"You gonna tell us?" he encouraged.

Thor clasped his hands, holding them to his chin. "It wouldn't be right." He looked at each one of

them, and his gaze on Tony seemed especially meaningful. "He didn't tell me a story of plots and scheming like I expected. He told me of a past filled with pain and endless torment. I cannot betray him by breaking his confidence now."

"Breaking his confidence?" Steve said, sounding both flummoxed and pissed. "Thor, *we're* the ones who needed to know!"

"I know," Thor said, "and I am truly sorry I must keep his silence." He shook his head. "Let it be enough for me to say Loki always intended to fail in his plan to conquer Midgard. He wanted to be stopped to prevent something much worse from happening."

Tony got the inference. "Thanos."

Thor simply nodded.

Trying to put together a puzzle with only half the pieces was vexing to say the least. Tony studied Thor's face. He may not have Loki's gift for reading people, but he was pretty sure he recognized what he was seeing.

He's not angry with Loki anymore. Whatever Loki had told him, it had finally stemmed the flood of the thunder god's wrath. Either Loki was a *really* good sweet-talker, or he'd had one fucking hell of a story.

No other Avenger looked satisfied with Thor's reticence.

"Why do you get to decide what we know?" Clint broke the silence first.

Regret flickered across Thor's countenance. "I am sorry. But what Loki told me is too personal. The only part that concerns Midgard is this. He needed Thanos to believe he was under his control, and that is why he came to Midgard nine months ago. But he always intended he should fail, thus keeping Thanos from Midgard. The Mad Titan never intended to simply put Loki on a Midgardian throne. He would have slaughtered humanity. My brother wanted to ensure Thanos' army - the Chitauri - were destroyed."

"So Loki only brought a fraction of the destruction Thanos would have to Earth?" Steve said. He didn't sound understanding at all. "That doesn't change anything, Thor. He still attacked Earth. He's still responsible for the deaths of hundreds—maybe thousands."

Thor lightly thumped his palm on the table. "I will say no more. I am going with Loki to confront the shadow witch. It is your choice to come or stay. I will understand both." He rose and left the room with quiet dignity.

Tony immediately stood up, too. "Can I talk to you a sec, Cap? Alone?"

Steve looked surprised, but he rose and looked at the other Avengers. "I think we should all reconvene tomorrow morning."

Tony flicked a glance at Bruce. "Not you, Doc. I have some experiments I want to run with you."

Bruce just nodded, and content he would stay, Tony led Steve to his lab.

"What's this about?" Steve asked, leaning against one of the counters and folding his arms.

Tony hesitated, making a show of arranging himself comfortably and sighing. *Guess it's best to stick with a abridged version of the truth.* "Thor asked me to try to get Loki to open up," he began.

"He and I have been . . . guess you could say we're getting along pretty well."

Steve nodded. "I've noticed. In fact, Loki only seems relaxed when he's around you."

Tony rolled his shoulders, deeply uncomfortable. *Yeah. So relaxed we fucked last night.* Seriously, he shouldn't have lowered his guard so much. "I bring this up because I think I *might* be able to get a little more information out of Loki than what Thor told us. So you guys don't bother him."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "Are you feeling *protective* of him? Stark, he's our—"

"He's our enemy, yeah," Tony cut him off. "That's just it. He's *not*. Not anymore. And that isn't why I'm saying this. Think about it. The more you push that guy, the more he'll resist. If all of us are interrogating him, all that's likely to gain us is missing limbs. But if *I* approach, as close to a friendly figure as he's like to get, I might be able to glean a bit more pertinent information."

Now Steve paused, looking thoughtful. "Hm. I see what you're saying." He seemed to mull it over. "All right. We might as well utilize any angle we might have."

Tony didn't like his relationship (or whatever it was) with Loki being summed up as an *angle*, but what else was it? Loki certainly didn't seem to consider Tony anything other than a coworker and possibly a fuck-buddy.

That was a role Anthony Stark wasn't used to filling. He had fuck-buddies. He wasn't anyone else's toy.

Okay, off track there, Stark. "I'll let you know if I learn anything. Loki hasn't been exactly forthcoming with me, but he has let a few things slip. He had suggested it wasn't his idea to come down to Earth and play the conquering war god."

Steve blinked. "What? Why didn't you say something?"

"I thought I misinterpreted," Tony said. "It was a little out-of-context. But anything he tells me in the future, you'll be the first to know."

The captain's shoulders relaxed almost imperceptibly. "Thanks, Stark. It's good to hear you haven't forgotten whose side you're on."

Yeah, Loki won't let me forget. "Sure thing, Cap. Now go do whatever it is you do when you're not saving the world. Me and the doc have a few things to work on before tomorrow."

Soon the Avengers were gone except for Tony and Bruce, which at the moment was perfect. Bruce followed Tony to his work lab, looking curious.

"You have a project?" he asked, going immediately to the prototype of the new Iron Man suit.

"Yep," Tony said, going to his monitors. "Jarvis, let's run a few simulations. We're going to find out if I can use magic as a power source."

Bruce turned from the prototype with an incredulous expression. "What?"

"Magic. As a power source. To power my—"

"I heard you," Bruce cut him off with a raised eyebrow. "I just wasn't sure I . . . *heard* you."

Tony grinned. "That's right, Jekyll and Hyde. We're going to another realm, right? I need to be in top form." He tapped his chest. "I can't rely on this to keep my suit powered. Who knows how long

we'll be there. And since I won't have my lab to recharge, I need an alternate source. Magic ought to be pretty abundant, either from Loki or from Thor's lightning."

After a moment, Bruce nodded. "I see your point. What do you need me for?"

"You're gonna help me with reconfiguring my suit for magic. Jarvis has a lot of data from Thor and Loki. Between the three of us, we should be able to make this work."

Twentieth Installment: Interlude

I lied. Next chapter will get back to action. Skip this chapter if you don't like pointless citrus.

Twentieth Installment: Another Interlude

The sky of his dreamscape was darker than usual as Loki stalked across the endless expanse.

He knew his mother was here somewhere, waiting for him. Just this once, he didn't seek her out. She would know something was wrong, and she would want him to talk. If he had to go through that all again, he would probably finally and completely break down. He couldn't bear the thought of that, not even with her.

So he stormed across the dreamscape and considered creating a conflict just to distract himself. *Perhaps I should have Thor appear so I can kill him.* The savage thought fluttered across his mind and was just as quickly dismissed. No, the aggression was misplaced. If he was brutally honest, the anger festering inside him wasn't directed at Thor.

Not entirely, anyway.

He didn't know how long he'd been wandering when he felt a distant pressure. He blinked, looking up. That felt like a presence skimming over the surface of his dreamscape. A person asleep not consciously trying to reach him, but still unconsciously drawn to him. Curious and definitely wanting a distraction, he drifted toward the disturbance and stepped out of his dreamscape and into the dream.

The sky was a grungy brown-gray in color, the buildings all around dirty and abandoned. Loki could see a commotion as a handful of men waving ridiculously huge guns chased a figure through deserted streets. As the figure neared Loki and actually saw him, the people giving chase suddenly vanished.

Loki raised an eyebrow, not entirely shocked. "Stark. You must be fixated on me very strongly to have found my dreamscape. Even unconsciously."

Stark didn't look surprised. But then, this was his dream. "Are you here to be an ass? Because if so, I won't thank you for getting them off my tail." He waved vaguely behind him.

Amused, Loki decided to play along. It was distracting. "Of course. I have nothing better to do with my time than make sure random strangers with guns don't kill you. Where is your suit, Iron Man?" Mocking and a bit scornful.

"Hey, I was just out for a stroll when those hooligans ambushed me," Stark said. "Thought they wanted an autograph."

Loki snorted a laugh. "Seems you are at the center of your own orbit."

"It happens, jackass," Tony snapped. "I'm rich, I'm sexy, I give money to charities, and I'm a superhero. Doesn't get much better than that."

"You're not a god," Loki quipped, in a better mood just being in Stark's dream.

"Yeah, neither are you," Tony said, suddenly reaching out and grabbing Loki's wrist. "You're a guy

with magic power who will live a long time, but still can *die*. That means you're not a god either, princess."

Loki blinked. To his shock, he was actually *shorter* than Stark. Then he regained his mental balance. This was a dream, after all. More specifically, this was *Stark's* dream, a man who didn't like not having the upper hand. In any way.

"Compared to you, I may as well be," he couldn't help goading.

"We'll see about that," Stark growled.

Then they were kissing. Well, it wasn't so much a kiss as Stark shoving his tongue down Loki's throat and doing his level best to devour the Aesir. Loki resisted only for a few seconds before he gave into it and started kissing Stark back.

Instantly, the kiss changed. From demanding and a little vicious, now it was deep and sensual, Stark's tongue winding around his and stroking and sucking. Loki's eyes fluttered shut in appreciation. He'd not had contact like this in a *very* long time.

In the back of his mind, he noticed the setting change. Now they were on a deserted beach with soft white sand. *How very cliché*. The sun hovered low on the horizon and splashed the sky with orange and pink.

Hands slid beneath his shirt, and Loki almost started to realize he wasn't wearing his traditional Asgardian garb any longer. He was in simple blue jeans and a dark green tee shirt with a shallow 'v' neck. And barefoot, too. The sand felt soft and nice against his feet, but it was a distant realization. Strong, calloused hands pressing up his spine were taking most of his attention.

He pulled back from the kiss. "What are you doing, Stark?" he asked, voice a bit teasing.

"Kissing you," Stark replied as if Loki was an idiot.

Loki gave him a patient look. "Yes, I was on the receiving end of it. *Why* are you doing this, Stark?"

"You're talking too much," was the only reply he received, then suddenly he was on his back in the sand.

Spine arching, Loki immediately made his displeasure known by digging his fingers into Stark's arms. And again he was shocked, this time to find Stark too strong to throw off. For a second, anger hazed his vision red. Then it dissipated. This was just a dream. One Stark would likely not even remember.

And if nothing else, this was an interesting diversion from his own dark thoughts. So he yielded and let those calloused hands run up under his shirt and over his chest. Stark's facial hair tickled his skin as the man leaned down to put his mouth right on Loki's ear.

"That's right, princess," he breathed. "Just let me have this. You're a cold bastard in every other part of your life. Don't be like that in my bed."

And Loki noticed they were now in Stark's bed. He didn't have time to do more than notice before a demanding mouth was on his once more. He obediently parted his lips, but after a few seconds of enjoying the feel of Stark's hands he pushed at the man's chest. Stark took the hint and moved to Loki's jeans.

A few seconds of fumbling with the button, then warm fingers were sliding inside. Loki allowed a quiet gasp of pleasure at the feel of it, and Stark drank the sound. Loki had only a few seconds to enjoy it before suddenly they were both naked and he was face down on the bed with warm weight bearing down on him.

Not a position he would have ever allowed, but . . .

Dream.

And Stark was suddenly filling him without warning or even permission. Loki sucked in a sharp breath. There was no pain. Of course there wasn't. Teeth nibbled around the shell of his ear.

"Let me hear you, Loki," Stark whispered.

Loki smiled and denied him, twisting his head so their mouths could meet again. The kiss was deep and sweet. Arching, Loki pressed his back to Stark's chest and gyrated his hips.

Then they were moving. It was different than the other night. The position was more vulnerable for one. For another, Stark's hands were all over him. The pleasure wasn't technically real, but that didn't stop it from feeling good. His mind more than up for that.

The closeness was different, too. Stark was so close to him there wasn't an inch of skin that wasn't touching. In reality, Loki had deliberately kept the distance between them. He wasn't interested in anything more than physical pleasure. He still wasn't, but no one had ever touched him like this, and Loki was in just the right frame of mind to allow it instead of simply stepping out of this incredibly personal and somewhat invasive dream.

"Loki . . ." Stark murmured.

With a sensuous roll of the man's hips, Loki moaned faintly at the answering burst of pleasure.

"Fuck," Stark hissed.

Loki *almost* moaned again when teeth sank into the back of his neck. He lifted his head and pushed back with his shoulders. "Let me be on top," he demanded softly.

"No," Stark grunted, biting down harder.

Loki couldn't help smiling, an image popping into mind of Stark as a dog who refused to let go of a favorite toy. "If you don't, I'll use magic."

Even dream-Stark couldn't argue with that. He grumbled under his breath, and Loki bit his lip at the feel of the man pulling out. A few more seconds and their positions were reversed, Loki now settled astride Stark's hips. He wasn't even sure he *could* use magic on Stark in his dream. *He's in control here, not me.* So he didn't try to keep Stark's hands pinned. He simply let Stark guide him to the optimum position.

His eyes fluttered shut when they were joined again. Though he'd not been a virgin before his and Stark's first actual coupling, he'd never let a man do this to him before. Never wanted to until Stark. But his curiosity and Stark's persistence were too sweet an allure apparently, and Loki certainly didn't regret it. The appeal was in the pain and the pleasure, and Loki relished both.

Spreading his palms on Stark's chest, he lifted his hips and started a slow rhythm. Stark immediately matched him with forceful thrusts upward, and Loki allowed a satisfied, faint moan.

"Fuck, Loki," Stark groaned, his hands sliding up Loki's waist, "you're so hot. So goddamn hot riding me like this."

Smiling in a way that clearly said he wasn't pleased, Loki reached up and placed two fingers on Stark's lips. "Keep talking and I'll carve your tongue out of your mouth."

Stark responded by parting his lips and sucking the two fingers into his mouth. A shiver raced up Loki's spine as the man expertly twined his tongue around them, eyes dark and smoldering as they watched Loki's face. Well, of course Stark would be a tease.

Then Stark's hand reached up and clasped the back of Loki's neck, dragging him downward to renew their kiss. The change in position caused the most wonderful friction inside Loki, and he moaned again. Stark tried to devour him once more, and Loki's whole body clenched up in pre-orgasm tension.

Then, with a suddenness that startled him, he came. Unlike reality when he'd kept his seed from spilling, this time there was no such prevention.

"Fuck, I didn't even touch you," Stark panted into Loki's mouth.

Loki smiled as Stark kept moving. "Fortunately," he murmured, "I have the stamina of a god. Keep going, Stark. Bring me to climax again, and perhaps this time I'll let you come inside me."

The dream shimmered, and Loki was abruptly back in his dreamscape, clothed in his traditional armor once more. He couldn't help a low, somewhat malicious laugh. *He will be very unhappy that he woke before he got to the best part.* The mirth tempered, but the smile remained, almost invisible but there.

He didn't even notice that his dreamscape sky had brightened to its usual warm azure.

Twenty-First Installment

Twenty-First Installment: A Dangerous Dance

Tony woke *pissed*. "Jarvis!" he snarled. "What the hell!"

"You requested I wake you at six a.m.," the AI said, droll as ever. "It is six a.m."

"Fuck," Tony swore, raking hands through his hair. He'd so seriously thought about telling Jarvis to wake him at seven.

Why hadn't he said seven? Then the sexiest dream in the history of dreams wouldn't have been interrupted. *God damn it*. The beginning of his dream had been weird and random. Then, there was Loki. Looking so bloody sexy and edible, and then . . . *Fuck. He let me fuck him. Why can't my Loki be like that?*

Tony blinked. *Whoa. Shit. Slow down there, lover-boy. Loki ain't my anything. He'd castrate me and make me eat it if he knew I even thought that.*

And what was with his overly familiar attitude, anyway? He was treating Loki more like a lover than a simple comrade-in-arms. Someone he just happened to have fucked once. He rubbed his hands over his face. *Shit. I need to stop thinking about him all the time. How does he even manage to stir me up so much?*

Beyond irritated, Tony flung back the blankets. Hello, little problem. He *hated* waking up like this and not having some pliable body next to him to help with it. *Why the hell didn't I tell Jarvis seven? I didn't even get to come in my dream*. He shivered to think of that low, almost breathy promise,

"Keep going, Stark. Bring me to climax again, and perhaps this time I'll let you come inside me."

"Jesus, Loki," he whispered, rising and half stumbling to his bathroom.

Maybe he needed to go call Pepper and say they shouldn't have broken up eight months ago. It'd been an amiable break up. They'd been through too much together for it to end badly. She was still his closest and most trusted friend, but Tony had been afraid of her getting hurt. Baddies from Earth were one thing. Baddies from space were another thing altogether.

But right now, Tony *really* needed someone else to fixate on. Someone safer. Someone saner. Shaking his head with a rueful smile, Tony took a quick—and *cold*—shower and got dressed. He headed to his lab to work on a few more specs, then just before eight he headed up to his lounge.

To his relief, Loki was there. Sprawled like a fucking goddess on the leather sofa, reading *another* fat tome of some sort. He wasn't effeminate, but the mental image of a *god* brought someone like Thor to mind. Too big and clumsy and hairy to be associated with Loki. Goddess was the only word close enough to capture Loki's grace, elegance, and fucking ridiculous hotness.

"Glad you're here," he said as he strolled to the fridge. "Got an idea I wanna run by you."

Loki's green eyes lifted from his page, and did it seem like there was a knowing glitter in them? "I'm all yours, Stark."

Tony blinked, then he realized a split second later he'd misheard. *I'm all ears. I'm fucked. I need a*

girlfriend. Or a hooker. "I was thinking about us leaving Earth—Midgard—to go chase after this witch. There probably won't be a generator for me to plug my suit into when the power levels get low."

Loki's pale lips curved in a slight smile. "Regrettably. Are you about to ask if magic can be used as an alternate power source?"

Tony half smiled. *Quick on the uptake, as usual.* "Is it possible?"

"Possible?" Loki repeated. "Yes. Realistic? Likely not. Your technology isn't compatible with crystals, and crystals are the best storage and delivery system for magic."

Now Tony's smile was broader. "This is *me* you're talking to. I'm brilliant, remember? As soon as I watched you finish your damn Aether staff, I started researching. I was real curious about that crystal you called god's tear, and I made a couple special orders. And last night, Bruce and I ran some simulations. I think if I had your help with interfacing, I could have a working prototype . . . by the end of the day."

Loki *almost* looked surprised. Then he closed his book and rose. "How forward-thinking. Let me see."

"Soon," Tony promised. "I haven't eaten breakfast. And I'm betting you haven't either."

The god of mischief made a dismissive gesture. "I can go days without eating."

"Hence why you're skinny as a twig."

Blinking, Loki glanced down his own body. "I'm not skinny."

"Yes you are," Tony said, going to his side and wrapping an arm (hey, it was necessary) around Loki's waist to guide him to the bar. "Sit. Let me make you a nice meal." He tried not to lament how, in his dream, he'd been taller than Loki.

Unusually compliant, Loki simply sat without arguing. "What varieties of crystal grow in Midgard?"

"A lot," Tony replied. "It would take me a year just to go over them all. I ordered mostly various quartzes, hopefully you'll like one of them for energy conferring."

"I'm sure," Loki murmured, watching as Tony prepared oranges for squeezing. He accepted the glass of juice when Tony was done, looking curious. He sampled it, and his eyes fluttered shut in appreciation.

Tony's body gave a completely inappropriate reaction to the sight. He cleared his throat. "Glad you like it."

Loki's eyes opened, and he gave Tony a rather sultry smile over the rim of the glass. "I believe this is the best drink with which you've plied me, Stark. Finally learned I don't enjoy drinking swill?"

Snorting, Tony poured himself a glass. This was the Loki who'd so gotten under Tony's skin. Content, relaxed, demanding, and a smart-ass without that usual edge of malice. *Everyone's taken care of me pretty much my whole life*, the thought came unbidden. *Even Pepper*. Once, Tony wouldn't have realized he wanted to take care of someone else, for a change.

Turning away from Loki, he closed his eyes and took in a slow, deep breath. *Okay, I've gotta stop.*

Just stop. This is so not healthy.

"Thor didn't tell us what you talked about," he changed the subject.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Loki stiffen. When he turned to face the god, his entire countenance had changed. Anger bloomed viridian in his eyes.

"What reason did he give?"

The reaction threw Tony off balance. "That it was too personal and painful," he replied, folding his arms.

Loki let out a sound that was half laughter, half growl. "So he puts me through that and then doesn't even have the decency to tell you himself—"

"Actually," Tony said, reaching over the bar to grab Loki's chin, "he didn't want to break *your* confidence. So stop getting mad by yourself. He was looking out for you."

Loki grabbed Tony's wrist and slammed it down on the counter—and yeah, it hurt. A lot. "Do not *ever* speak to me like that again, Stark."

Tony winced but didn't try to free himself. "Okay, you're right. I'm sorry. I'm an ass without thinking, sometimes. Most of the time."

The fire in those incredible eyes flickered down to embers as Loki released him. The tension in his frame didn't melt away, though. "The whole point of that apparent exercise in futility was to satisfy the insatiably morbid curiosity of you fool humans so you would *leave me alone*."

"Which Thor made us all agree to," Tony said. Bruises were already blossoming on his wrist. "He did say you planned your own defeat to prevent something much worse from happening."

Loki gazed at him in silence for a few seconds, expression pensive. Then, "Never speak of it to me again. I don't care to hear your thoughts on the matter. Gossip amongst yourselves if you cannot let it lie."

He was losing Loki, Tony could feel it. All the comfortable rapport he'd been building with the god was crumbling before his eyes. And Tony simply could not let it happen. He knew better than to give in to baser impulses right now and kiss Loki like he half wanted. So all he said was,

"You're safe with me, Loki. I'm in your corner, all right?"

Whether Loki appreciated the sentiment or not, he couldn't tell. The Aesir turned so he was sitting sideways on the barstool. "I thought you were making a meal for me."

Tony obediently went back to that task, mentally cursing himself for bringing it up at all and scrambling for another topic. He blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"You're way more amenable in my dreams, you know."

Success. Almost imperceptibly, Loki's shoulders relaxed and he looked at Tony with an amused half-smile. "Oh?"

"Yeah. It might do you good to take a lesson from dream-Loki."

Loki looked away with a soft snort, but it seemed the tension had at last drained away. "Please get on with breaking your fast, Stark. I'm more interested in working on this project than eating."

"All right, all right," Tony grumbled, focusing. "Demanding bastard."

The quiet sound he heard from Loki could have been the faintest chuckle. Tony chose to believe it was.

oOo

"I've made all the necessary preparations for leaving," Thor told the Avengers. They were all gathered except for Tony, but Thor suspected the Iron Man was with Loki. At least, he hoped so.

"Do you have any idea how long we'll be gone?" Steve asked. "I'd like to give Director Fury an estimate."

Thor paused, looking at the captain. "What do you plan to tell him?"

Steve offered a slightly rueful smile. "A modified version of the truth. I'm just saying we're going to take the fight to the witch."

Nodding, Thor didn't bother to hide his relief. "I suspect this will take us from Midgard for at least a few of your weeks. Loki will be better able to answer that question than I. Do any of you know where Stark is?"

"In his lab," Bruce said, "working on a way to modify the power requirements for his suit. He wanted me to ask. Would you be able to charge it with your lightning? He said you struck him with it once and it worked pretty well."

Thor couldn't help but smile at the memory. It had been a good fight. He wouldn't mind a repeat just to stay sharp. "Yes. As many times as needed." He was glad his friend had thought ahead.

"What are we going to do about food?" Natasha asked.

Beginning to pace, Thor clasped his hands behind his back. "Loki will take care of that tonight." And he wouldn't like the how of that, either. It would require returning to Asgard for a time.

"And when are we leaving?" Clint asked.

"As soon as Loki is ready," Thor said, "which should be tomorrow morning." He wasn't even sure where they were going. He turned toward the door. "I'm going to speak with him. Take this time to ready yourselves, my friends."

Tony's laboratory was quite a large room, and Thor couldn't fathom the use for any of the equipment therein. The door opened for him without touching it, and when he crossed the threshold he didn't immediately see his friend and brother. Across the room was an enclosure walled off by glass, and there were Tony and Loki, apparently working on one of Tony's suits.

Thor paused, watching the scene before him. There was no tension in Loki's posture. He was wearing dark blue jeans and a red tee shirt. The rich color was striking against Loki's pale skin, but the thing that caught his attention and held it was Stark.

The man was completely attuned to Loki. Everything from the position of his body to the way his shoulders leaned toward Loki to the way his eyes stayed on Loki's face said there was only one important thing right now. It surprised Thor. He was used to seeing men act this way around a woman they deeply admired—a woman whose attention they desired.

And more shocking still, as Thor watched, Tony kept touching Loki. A hand to the other's wrist. A

hand on his waist. Reaching up to brush ebony hair off a slim neck. A hand on the back of his shoulder to turn him to face where Stark wanted. The shock was in that Loki *allowed* it. More than allowed. Tolerated. Enjoyed? Loki's countenance spoke only of contentment.

Unexpected emotions welled up in Thor's breast. Once, Loki had been that way with Thor. He longed for a time when that part of Loki was his again. And he felt a rush of something much deeper than gratitude that Tony had somehow coaxed this gentler side of Loki out of the frozen walls around his heart.

Even as he wondered how deep Tony's seeming affections went. Was it more than camaraderie? If so, that made Tony both brave and unwise. Thor simultaneously wished Loki had someone like that and disapproved. He knew Tony had a sexual reputation to match the bawdiest Aesir warrior.

Loki needed love. Not lust.

Though he couldn't hear them, Thor saw Loki's lips move as he said something. Tony's eyes went to Loki's mouth, and the question was answered. *That is desire*. Tony wasn't even bothering to hide it. Of course, he wasn't aware of his audience. Loki didn't appear to notice.

Deciding he'd seen enough, Thor strode across the lab and rapped his knuckles against the glass. Startled brown and displeased green eyes looked up at him. Tony reached to the panel beside the glass door, and it slid open.

"What's up, big guy?" Stark inquired. There was no guilt or shame on his face.

Thor decided to hold his peace until he knew more. Loki was hardly a wilting violet who needed protection. "Loki, I have need of your knowledge."

Expression inscrutable, Loki stepped out of that small room—really, did he need to be standing so close to Stark?

"What is it, Thor?"

Thor removed the amulet from around his neck and held it up for Loki to see. "Father gave this to me. Do you know what it is?"

Loki didn't even look at it, anger beginning to darken his features. "Of course I do. Not everyone disdains learning as a pastime of the weak."

Loki's bitterness didn't seem to have the power to rouse Thor's anger, any longer. No, he just felt sadness. How often had he mocked Loki's penchant for burying his nose in Mother's books as just that?

"I'm sor—" he began.

"Don't," Loki snapped, making a slashing gesture as he stalked past Thor.

Giving Stark a last look, Thor followed him. Loki didn't stop until they were on the roof of Stark's tower, and he faced Thor with a calmer expression.

"Stop trying to placate me, Thor," he said in a low voice. "Stark told me you decided to treat everything I told you as some sort of secret told in the utmost confidence. What in the Nine possessed you to do that? The whole reason I put myself through the ordeal was so your fool human friends would be satisfied and leave me be. And you chose to keep it to yourself?"

Thor carefully organized his thoughts before speaking. "I am not trying to placate you, Loki. I want you to understand I *care* about you. That I deeply regret how I've treated you in the past—"

"I don't care about that," Loki cut him off. "It's over. It's done. Do you think I'm so pathetic as to hold onto a grudge?"

Striding forward, Thor grabbed Loki's upper arms. He resisted the urge to shake his little brother. "I don't know what to think, Loki. You keep your heart sealed so tightly away I don't even know why you're angry with me!"

Loki's face contorted in a snarl as he hit Thor's hands away. "Of course you don't. You're an utter *fool*, Thor."

"*Talk* to me, Loki," Thor growled, frustration bubbling up in his chest. "Yes, I'm a fool. So help me understand why we can't put this behind us! Help me understand what happened to my brother!"

"*That* is why I'm angry, Thor," Loki hissed. "You look at me at see your younger brother. The second prince. The other *Odinson*. Your faithful shadow. Your most loyal supporter. Do you ever look at me and just see *me*?"

Thor stopped, pieces started falling into place, and he felt like his heart was breaking. "Do you truly believe I think you *inferior* to me?"

Loki's rage did not relent. "You have acted that way for centuries. Do not try to deny it."

Thor didn't. "Loki, I would be *nothing* without you. How many times did you save my life? How many times did you quietly console me when I suffered some slight—real or imagined? How many nights did you sit at my side and tell me I would be a great king? How many feasts to honor nobility from the Nine did you whisper names in my ear so I did not look the fool? Do you know how many times I said to Mother and Father I could not be king without you? My confidence was bolstered *because* of you!"

A twisted smile. "So the fault lies with me, then? Perhaps I should have been more careful with my words. Even your pathetic attempts at flattery demean me. You would be king, and I would be what, exactly? The advisor who whispers names in your ear to keep you from looking the fool?"

Thor refused to be baited. "I was always envious of *you*."

That threw Loki off balance, but only for a moment. "And now you appeal to my vanity?"

"Are you going to deny every word that comes out of my mouth for the rest of time?" Thor demanded. "Loki, all of Asgard was envious of you. You are the silvertongue. The one who could achieve anything."

"I was *feared*, not envied," Loki corrected with no small amount of spite. "The strange, *un-warrior-like* brother of Thor who spent too much time reading and not enough time trying to be a proper *Aesir* son of Odin. I believe it was you who said my study of magic was a *womanly* pursuit, dear brother."

A knife to the heart, that. "If I could take that back, I would—"

"But you can't," Loki interrupted again, "so this is a pointless exchange. Neither of us can change what has already transpired."

For the first time, Thor was absolutely certain Loki's poisonous words were a defense and nothing

more. He wasn't sure what Loki was afraid of if he let Thor in, but all he could do was prove over and over to Loki he had nothing to fear until at last his brother believed it.

"No," he murmured, "we can't. All I can do is heal the wounds I've caused. I love you, Loki, and I am deeply ashamed of how I've hurt you. I am truly sorry, and I will say it until it is ingrained in your very soul and you cannot doubt it."

His warm, gentle tone of voice seemed to unsettle Loki more than intensity. "Don't flatter yourself, Thor," he sneered. "You don't have the power to hurt me." He vanished in a haze of green mist.

Thor looked up at the sky and closed his eyes. "Mother," he whispered, "I wish you were still here. You would know how I could reach him."

"Hey," Stark's voice said behind him. "I thought Loki was with you?"

Given a sudden outlet for his frustration, Thor turned to face the human. "What are your intentions toward my brother?"

Tony froze. "Uh . . . what the hell? Way to throw a guy a curve ball."

"Answer my question."

"Mind telling me where this is coming from?"

"Just now, in your lab. I know what desire when I see it on a man's face."

Stark's complexion seemed to lose a bit of its color. "Look, Thor. I'm just trying to get Loki to loosen up a little, okay? Let him know he doesn't need to be so guarded. We aren't his enemies, right? You wanted me to get him to open up, remember?"

"That does not include leading him on," Thor snapped. "He's been through enough. Do not ever let me see you touch him again." With that warning, he brushed past the human.

The Avengers needed to be prepared for the first journey through the Bifrost.

Twenty-Second Installment

Twenty-Second Installment: A New Perspective

When last he'd come here, he'd been muzzled and chained. Loki had found the gag oddly gratifying. Though the chains had been magical in nature to prevent him from using any, Thor had still considered his tongue a dangerous-enough weapon to silence. Even though he was walking down the rainbow bridge again, Loki couldn't help a small smile at the memory.

Loki Silvertongue. That was what they'd called him. It had a nicer ring to it than Loki Odinson.

Though no words had been exchanged about it, he knew as soon as they were snatched up in the Bifrost that his placement among the Avengers was intentional. Thor and the good Captain were in the lead, Rogers to Thor's right. Loki was behind them, and Natasha was to his right. Stark and Barton walked right behind, and Banner brought up the rear.

Heimdall inclined his head to Thor. "Welcome home, my prince," he said, his golden eyes uncharacteristically warm.

"Thank you, Heimdall," Thor replied. "Allow me to introduce my friends."

Loki managed not to roll his eyes. The Gatekeeper didn't even acknowledge Loki until it was all over, and it was only with a look he supposed was meant to give warning. Loki gave him a smile that could have been a greeting, could have been an, *I'm considering gouging out your eyes and feeding them to crows*.

They walked down the rainbow bridge to the place Loki had sworn never to return. At his side, Natasha's eyes roved ahead.

"So this is the Bifrost," she said, sounding contemplative. She pointed to the edge of the wide bridge. "What's down there?"

"Yggdrasil," Loki replied. For some reason, she had a rather calming effect on him. Almost absently, "Not a place you'd wis to visit."

She shuddered. "From what Jane told me, definitely not."

Curious, Loki looked down at her. "You've spoken with Miss Foster about it?"

"Yeah," the Black Widow replied. "I wanted to know more about it. She described it as a place of 'making and unmaking'. Does that sound right?"

Loki gave a faint snort. "Succinct. I like it. I would like to hear more of her theories on what lies between the realms."

"Make sure I'm there," Natasha requested.

"I will," Loki promised, pleased. "She is very clever." He gave the redhead an appraising glance. "Not unlike yourself."

Natasha flicked him a smile. "If you're flirting, I think you should know I'm seeing someone."

Loki couldn't help a faint laugh. "Yes, the good captain. His chivalrous nature outshines my own."

She gave him a surprised look. So did Rogers. "You knew?" she inquired.

"You'll find it difficult to keep anything from me."

"Wow," she said, shaking her head. "Most people assume I'm with Clint."

"I am not most people," Loki reminded her, "and Barton treats you like a little sister."

"Do I?" Barton piped up. "Sorry, 'Tash. Don't mean to."

She threw him a grin. "I'm used to it. You kind of feel like my big brother, anyway."

The thought rose, unbidden, *I had such a free and easy relationship with my brother, once*. He viciously quashed that line of thinking. Sentiment was a refuge of the weak.

"This place is incredible," Banner said as they neared Asgard.

"Yeah, how long are we going to be here?" Stark asked.

"Not long," Thor replied. "Loki and I need to speak with our father in private, then we will go."

Loki didn't bother correcting him. What was the point?

When they reached the castle proper, two royal guards were waiting with Thor's idiotic friends. Volstagg, Sif, and Hogun all gave Loki glares that he supposed were meant to somehow intimidate. Only Fandral gave him a nod of acknowledgement that displayed no aggression. After another round of introductions, the guards bowed to Thor.

"If you will come with us, my prince. Your father awaits."

Dismissing Loki. He wanted to turn them both into rat fodder. He filed his hostility away for later.

The Allfather was waiting for them in his private sitting room instead of the throne room. He looked old and sad. Gone was the magnificent king who had seemed so large and powerful to the green-eyed child, the one whose approval had meant everything to him.

Approval he'd never received.

Loki swallowed down his rage, bitter poison in the back of his throat.

"Thor," the Allfather said, rising from his chair. "Thank you for bringing him."

Sparing Thor a murderous glare, Loki faced the one he truly did not know if he loved or hated more than anything else in existence. "If you're planning to chastise me, save the breath for your ancient lungs."

For once, Thor offered no reprimand. In fact, he didn't even look disapproving. He looked nothing at all, eyes fixed on his father's face. Another first, Loki couldn't read him.

"I am still your king," the Allfather said.

Loki barked a laugh. "Yes. My king. But that is all you have ever been. Where did the title Allfather come from, Odin? You have only one son, something you've made inescapably clear."

"That is not true," Odin snapped. "I raised you as my own, ungrateful wretch."

"And cast me away like refuse," Loki replied, feeling strangely calm. "From the moment I displayed my first interest in—and then affinity for—magic, you stopped trying to understand me and gave all your love and approval to Thor. The son just like you. Should I apologize I am not Thor, all-knowing Allfather? For that is certainly the only way I would have pleased you."

"I have only ever—!" Odin roared.

"Father."

Thor didn't raise his voice. He sounded neither angry nor even forceful. There was an odd intensity Loki had never heard before, and his eyes bored into Odin's face. Odin was shocked into silence, his one eye slightly wide.

"My son?" he queried.

"Neither I nor you have the right to judge Loki," Thor said softly. "You disowned him as your son and proclaimed him an enemy of Asgard. You agreed to suspend his sentence if he joined the Avengers of Midgard, which he has done. You have no claim to his fate. That ended when you threw him away."

Loki had to close his eyes against the unwelcome rush of emotions. "Do not speak for me, Thor," he grated. *Why are you siding with me against your father, you fool? Do you want him to cast you away, as well?* And why did he even care?

The shock in Odin's countenance rapidly changed to anger. "Do not allow his silver tongue to lull you into lowering your guard, my son, else he will plunge the poisoned needle into your heart."

"A betrayal you would know well," Thor said, still in that soft voice. "Perhaps if you had shown Loki acceptance and forgiveness on the Bifrost that day, he would not have fallen into madness and despair."

"You would place that blame on *me*?" Odin demanded.

"Yes," Thor said simply, "for that is where it lies."

Loki could scarce believe what he was hearing.

Apparently, Odin could not, either. "How dare you speak to your king—!"

"Neither of us is perfect," Thor cut him off, still low and gentle. "We do not always know the best way, and we don't have the right to sit in judgment that neither does he."

To Loki's shock, Odin went silent. Father and son gazed at each other for a long, long time. Loki watched the tableau, unable to move. Then, suddenly and terribly, Odin's eye fell shut and a tear slid down his lined and weathered cheek.

"You are right, my son," he murmured, half turning away. When he looked back to Loki, something foreign had entered his countenance. "Do the humans treat you well, Loki?"

No, not foreign. Just something he'd not seen in a very, very long time. He nodded, tongue sealed firmly behind his teeth.

Odin turned away. "Good. That is good."

At that apparent dismissal, Thor walked to the door. After another moment of frozen silence, Loki

followed his bro—Thor. They were halfway to Thor's room when Loki finally stopped.

"What was *that*?"

Thor halted and turned to face him. "Father wanted to see you before we left to face the witch."

"That isn't what I meant," Loki snapped. "Why were you . . . what in the Nine possessed you to . . . to . . ."

"To remind Father he isn't perfect?" Thor said mildly. "He isn't perfect. A reminder was due."

It was said so matter-of-factly, a slight edge of, *Isn't it obvious?* Loki stared at him, feeling completely off balance. *Why did you defend me?* He couldn't remember that ever happening. The emotions that had been so close to the surface these last several days were starting to feel like poison in Loki's veins.

"Fool," he murmured. "You are a complete fool, Thor." There was no venom in his voice. He couldn't summon any. The only thing he felt was tired.

"Yes," Thor agreed blithely. He reached up and removed the amulet from around his neck. "Will you please take care of this for me? I have just one thing to see to, and then we can go."

Numb, Loki took the pendant and watched Thor walk away from him. This . . . this was so much different than the last two days. This was wholly unexpected. Loki didn't know what to think, how to feel. He suddenly wished he could just cut his heart out and never feel anything ever again. No anger, no pain, no fury, no despair. Just peace. Blessed silence.

He stared down at the pendant in his hand. It was a key that could be enchanted to open a door to a place very similar to the dreamscape and the Bifrost. A place between given the misnomer Astral Realm when it wasn't a realm at all. It would allow him to store supplies for ease of access without having to haul around packs.

It wasn't an easy spell, but for Loki it was akin to a parlor trick. And being in Asgard when performing the spell would make it even easier. Magic was abundant here.

He went to his own room. It looked exactly the same as had it ever, and his eyes wandered around. There was a single white lily in a crystal vase by the bed. Instantly, Loki felt an unwanted sting of tears. His mother's favorite flower. Even from across the room he could feel the familiar tingle of her enchantment to keep it from wilting.

It was one of the first tricks she'd ever taught him.

Trembling fingers wrapped around the stem. Lifting it, he buried his nose in the soft petals and inhaled. It even still smelled fresh.

A tear streaked down his cheek. Here, where there was no one to see, just this once, he allowed himself to be weak.

Twenty-Third Installment

Just to all my readers: love you, love hearing your thoughts and feedback. :)

Twenty-Third Installment: Far From Home

Something was different. Tony wasn't sure what, but something had changed. Loki and Thor had only been away from the rest of the Avengers for thirty minutes. *Seriously, what can happen in half an hour?* Tony wasn't sure if the change was for the better or not, either. The god of mischief had gone silent, eyes dark and without their usual high shine.

He wasn't the only one who noticed, either. As they followed the two Aesir back down the rainbow bridge, Tony could tell his fellow humans were a bit uncomfortable with this inexplicable change. He could tell Natasha wanted to ask, but like Tony she didn't dare. *As soon as I can get him alone, I'll ask*, Tony resolved.

"I will tell Heimdall where we need to go," Thor said abruptly, looking down at Loki who was at his side, "and then you will take the lead from there. Is that acceptable, Loki? You are the only one who knows how to find the witch."

Loki nodded. That was all. No nasty look, no words sharp enough to kill, not even a twitch. Just a simple nod.

Tony wondered, *Is it possible to die of shock? Am I dead? What the hell happened in those thirty minutes?*

The large fellow with freaky eyes standing watch over the Bifrost nodded to Thor when they entered. "Where shall I send you, my prince?"

"Niflheim," Thor answered.

He fit his great sword into its slot. "Light of Valhalla protect you," he said, and the energy storm began.

When it abated, Tony looked around in open wonder. Completely different from Asgard or Earth, this place was strange and alien. The sky had neither sun nor moon, and the midnight blue lacked stars completely. Yet it wasn't as dark as night, the icy ground seeming to emanate the softest glow.

The terrain was rugged and frozen, mountains rising craggy and dark in the distance. Directly before was a swift-flowing river, its water appearing black. Small blue-white lights flickered around the banks, reminding Tony of large and strangely-colored fireflies. And all around was a pale silvery mist that seemed to move all on its own. There was no air current, giving it the impression of being alive.

In a word: creepy.

"What are those lights?" the captain asked, moving to stand at Thor's other side.

"You would call them fairies," Loki replied. "They are frost spirits, vicious carnivores."

Tony shook his head. *Even the fairies are creepy, here.*

Loki reached up and cupped the large pendant around his neck. Tony recognized it as the one Thor had been holding in his lab back home. He inwardly grimaced. *Right before big brother chewed me out. How the hell did he know I'm kinda carrying a torch for Loki?* Being threatened by a big brother to leave a younger sibling alone wasn't a novel experience.

Being threatened by big brother Thor, God of Thunder, well. That was all kinds of new. And more than a little alarming. Not that telling Tony he couldn't have something was any kind of effective deterrent.

He was Tony Stark.

While he was musing on these things, Loki started pulling shit out of thin air.

That was what it looked like. He started handing thick furs to Thor, who passed them out to the humans.

"How the hell are you doing that?" Tony demanded, crowding into Loki's personal space to get a better look. He refrained from touching, because Thor was right there after all.

"This is a key," Loki said, apparently finished and letting the pendant fall back to his chest, "to the place I'm storing our supplies."

Natasha's lips quirked in a faint grin. "Isn't this the place where Hel actually resides? Maybe best not to use her name as a curse?"

That made Steve, Thor, and Banner all chuckle.

Loki looked at Natasha, and Tony saw that faintly approving air he always had when looking at her. Seemed to be reserved for her alone, really.

"I'm surprised you know that."

She shrugged. "I figured the legends must be based at least distantly in fact."

"Quite distantly," Loki said, voice laced with scorn.

Once everyone was bundled up, Loki started out toward the river. Bruce fell in alongside Tony.

"How's the suit feel?" he asked.

Tony nodded. "Different, but pretty good."

"Different how?"

"More tingly," Tony said. "It's kinda nice."

Bruce snorted.

"But Loki's damn good at magical welding. Interfacing the suit to store and utilize an alternate form of energy was a breeze."

"Is it easy to get out of?" Natasha asked.

"Yep," Tony replied. "Modified that, too. Now it cracks in half. Like an egg."

"And that's sturdy?" Bruce wanted to know, looking skeptical.

"Loki gave it a magic release button," Tony said smugly. "Who else on Earth has a magical flying suit? A legitimate *magic* suit?"

They both snorted.

As they neared the river, those critters Loki had called vicious carnivores seemed to take notice of the approaching crowd.

"Uh, Loki?" Steve queried, halting and looking nervous. "Should we be worried they're coming this way?"

"No," Loki replied, now stopping too, "but all of you stay close together while I deal with this."

As they obeyed, Tony felt a sliver of anxiety. Didn't seem right, letting a fellow Avenger deal with a potential threat alone. *Yeah right*, whispered that voice in the back of his mind he was really starting to dislike. *You wouldn't care if it was Thor or the cap'n.*

The lights had gathered close together, and they all flew toward Loki in a swarm. The mage didn't so much as flinch, he merely held up a hand with palm facing to the sky. A pale green nimbus sprang up around him, making the mist swirling near change colors. Eerie and dramatic.

Then he started humming. No melody, not really. Just a low hum in the back of his throat. One by one the lights entered the nimbus, and each one slowed to a stop until they were just sort of floating around Loki. They, too, now looked green instead of bright blue. Then, lazy and leisurely as you please, they began drifting off.

"Go," Loki said, pointing with his free hand down the river, "now, while they're distracted. Do not speak. The sound of your voices will attract their attention."

The Avengers obeyed, Thor bringing up the rear and keeping a close watch on the frost spirits. Loki remained where he was until the others were quite some distance away, then he lowered his hand and the green light disappeared. The frost spirits didn't seem to care, whatever Loki had done placating them completely.

Loki rejoined them. Tony shook his head.

"There anything you can't do, princess?"

Green eyes flicked to meet his, and Tony was pleased to see a hint of good humor in them. Tony started to grin, then he noticed Thor was watching him with a monster of a disapproving scowl. He looked away. *Am I even gonna be able to get Loki alone? Ever again? Damn it.*

Loki led the way in silence for a long time. It felt brittle, and everyone seemed loath to break it. Eventually, Tony decided Loki was looking for something. Or listening, maybe. The beautiful god had an expression of extreme concentration, especially when the river they were following veered sharply toward the craggy mountains in the near distance.

When the river had angled between the peaks, Loki finally stopped. "We're here," he said. "I need to find the exact spot, it's constantly moving. All of you, wait here. I shouldn't be long. Don't touch the water."

"Is it poisonous?" Clint asked.

"No," Loki said. "You will be frozen solid in the blink of an eye. It would require a tremendous expenditure of energy on my part to unfreeze you." With that, he disappeared amongst the cliffs.

"Am I the only one who thinks it's weird he's not wearing a fur?" Clint said.

Even Thor was bundled up. His blue eyes tracked after his brother. "The cold has never bothered him," he said, sounding distant and distracted. "Are you all right, my friends? Niflheim is of the two harshest environs of the Nine."

Steve looked at the rest, and each nodded to him. "We're all right. Maybe don't want to take a vacation here."

Thor huffed a deep breath that made the mist around him swirl. "Thank you for your understanding," he said, "concerning . . . all of this. I know it can't be easy."

The captain shrugged one shoulder. "Loki is still one massive gray area, but we trust you, Thor."

The god of thunder looked down. When he looked up again, he was smiling. "It is not misplaced."

Soon, Loki reappeared. The mist billowed out in front of him, reacting to every move. "Come," he said. "We are about to pass into a strange place. You will be able to see nothing, hear nothing. Hold onto each other and do *not* let go. Breathe through your nose and do not speak. If you do, the darkness will try to choke you. It will feel as though we'll be in the darkness for a very long time. Just keep walking until you see light."

Tony tried not to shudder at that grim description. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"To find the shadow witch," Loki said, "we need to traverse the shadow. She never stays in one place for long."

"Can you not track her through your staff?" Thor inquired, frowning.

"In a way, but it is not very effective over long distances," Loki said. "Don't fret, Thor. The Aether has her own way of reaching me, and she will guide me as we near the witch."

Another creepy thought.

Loki led them into the cliffs. Through some very narrow passages, into some caves that wound downward and then back up, past a waterfall of ice, through swarms and swarms of mist. Then he stopped in front of what looked like a chasm. It yawned, wide and daunting, across the ground.

Seeming satisfied, Loki held out his hand to Thor. The god of thunder took it, but the rest of the Avengers were as reluctant as Tony.

"We're going down there?" Steve asked, eyeing it with obvious skepticism.

"Yes," Loki replied. "It is not a pit as it seems. It's a doorway. It won't remain open for long."

Sharing nervous looks, the humans completed the chain. When it was Tony's turn, he closed his eyes as he stepped off the edge.

The ground didn't disappear beneath his feet. In fact, it felt like he just kept walking. But when he opened his eyes, he felt like he'd been swallowed by a void just the same. Black. Endless, gaping, consuming black. No light. He couldn't see his hands, his feet, he couldn't see the body belonging to the hand wrapped around his. He couldn't hear his own breathing, he couldn't hear any footfalls, he couldn't even hear his heart beating.

It felt like everything had stopped existing, himself included. It was possibly the worst experience

of his life. Well, a close second. Tony felt like he couldn't breathe. He started opening his mouth to yell for his friends, but just in time he remembered Loki's admonishment and kept his lips sealed.

On and on it went. Surely a decade passed. A century. How could *nothingness* feel so terrible? At some point, he suddenly couldn't feel Natasha's hand in his left or Bruce's in his right. A sickening panic gripped him, and he squeezed both his hands. An answering squeeze helped calm him, and he tried to breathe normally again.

It was difficult, as if a hand was wrapped around his throat trying to strangle him. It took every iota of willpower he possessed not to open his mouth. Whether to breathe or to scream, he didn't know.

Then, so bright and unexpected it blinded him, there was a light. Blessed, blessed light. In front of him, Natasha started walking faster, and Tony tugged at Bruce's hand to make him walk faster, too. Then he was stumbling out of the dark and onto solid ground with *somethingness* around him again. He fell to his knees, planting his palms on the ground and resisting the urge to kiss it. He saw his friends had all reacted similarly.

In the lead, Loki was still standing, but he looked even paler than usual. Thor, who looked better off than the humans, eyed his brother with obvious concern.

"Are you all right, brother?" he asked softly.

"Fine," Loki said, but it lacked the typical snap usually audible when he spoke to Thor. "I'm not accustomed to traveling the shadow in that manner, but I have neither the means nor the time to teach all of you how."

Tony shook his head. Finally, he looked around. The sky still lacked sun, moon, or stars, but compared to the complete black of that other place there was light aplenty. Tony swore never to take it for granted again. Now, though, they weren't surrounded by a rough landscape. They were in what appeared to be an enormous, abandoned city. The buildings were all dark gray stone, hoary frost creeping up the sides in surprisingly pretty designs. They were all ridiculously large, too, as if giants had once inhabited them.

"Wow," Steve murmured, looking around. "What used to live here, Loki?"

"The Jotnar," Loki replied, "eons past. Before Odin's time. This city was abandoned when dark elves from Svartalfheim began to spread to other realms. In the next hundred years, Odin's father began cleaning them out. Pest control, I suppose." He sounded a little bitter.

"Do dark elves still live here?" Natasha asked.

"Not in the city proper," Loki said. "There is an entire city underground where they yet dwell, though. We will not be venturing there."

"Good," Steve said. "I'd rather not fight unless we have to."

Loki gave him an inscrutable look. "You will have to. Perhaps a great deal." His eyes turned down the streets. "But not today. Thor, let us find a relatively safe place to stay for a while. I need to find another doorway."

They hunkered down in a smaller building that had only a single door and two forward-facing windows. More easily defensible than others they'd seen, Tony gratefully helped Clint and Natasha build a fire with the supplies Loki retrieved for them. The heat and light both felt wonderful. Loki settled himself down in a corner and seemed to fall into a sort of trance. Tony couldn't help gazing at him, admiring that lean frame and beautiful face. He almost grimaced.

Yeah, I'm definitely an idiot.

Almost an hour had passed before Loki finally stirred. He rose and joined the others by the fire, sinking down between Thor and Steve. "I found another doorway," he said. The firelight danced on the surfaces of his eyes, making them appear as precious gems. "Unfortunately, its location is less than desirable."

"Where is it?" Steve asked, sounding tense.

Loki gave a rueful half-smile. "Exactly where I said we had no need to venture, the city below ground; and it is very much inhabited. The dark elves will be hostile to say the very least."

No one was happy to hear that.

Steve shifted. "We have no choice?"

"None," Loki replied.

The captain appeared to steel himself. "Then let's get ready for a fight."

Twenty-Fourth Installment

Twenty-Fourth Installment: Into the Deep

The captain didn't want to wait around, and for that Loki was grateful. He wanted to get traveling through the shadow over with. It was much easier when he was alone, for he simply drifted through the darkness like a shadow himself. With an entire company of fools tagging along, he had to actually *walk* through it.

It was unpleasant. Hopefully, he would only have to do it a few more times before he found the witch.

"What sort of weapons will the dark elves have?" Steve asked.

Ever the soldier. Loki considered. "Swords, but unlike any you've encountered. They will be enchanted with dark magic. If they even score the smallest wound, you will like as not bleed to death. They are deadly, dangerous even to the Aesir. However, dark elves wear mundane armor of tooled leather. They will be weak against your bullets." He reserved a rare smile for Stark.

"Against your suit they will be all but helpless."

The fool human broke into a ridiculously pleased grin.

For some reason, it caused Thor to glare at Stark. Loki didn't even bother asking. He didn't care.

"How deep into their ranks are we gonna have to wade?" Barton asked.

"I've been giving that some thought," Loki replied, "and I have an idea that will help minimize the time spent fighting. Natasha, are you and Hawkeye up to a little reconnaissance?"

The clever redhead caught on instantly. "Yeah. We can check out their numbers from a safe distance."

"Maybe cause a distraction," Barton added.

"The more time you can give me, the better," Loki said, "though it shouldn't take me long to find the doorway."

"Won't the dark elves know it's there?" Stark asked.

"No," Loki said. "They're not visible unless you know they're there. None of you could see it. You only saw a gaping chasm."

The humans all shuddered.

"What about us?" Thor asked, gesturing to include the captain and the good skin-changer.

Loki gave Thor a sardonic look. "You, my dear Thor, are a little too recognizable. I'm afraid you would draw exactly the attention I would prefer to avoid."

A touch of chagrin entered his brother's expression. Loki grimaced inwardly. Apparently, he was back to thinking of Thor as his brother. It was increasingly difficult to hold onto the anger he'd harbored so long with Thor being so damn . . . thoughtful.

He didn't care for this change.

"So we stay out of sight," the captain said.

"Unless a fight does break out, of course," Loki said. "Dark elves are strange about magic, so I would prefer no conflict."

Stark raised an eyebrow. "Strange about magic? What does that mean?"

Loki resisted the urge to sigh. "Remarkably few of them can use it," he explained with more patience than he felt, "so they covet it. I would be to them as a great big shiny piece of new technology would be to you." A slight grin that was all-too genuine.

Stark grinned, too.

Thor again gave Stark a disapproving scowl.

It irritated Loki. *What is this new development?* He decided to ask about it as soon as possible. For now, though, it could wait. He stopped in front of a building that was more than half crumbled in decay. Its state made Loki feel a pang of regret. Once, this city had been utterly magnificent, rivaling Asgard. Now it was a forgotten ruin.

"The entrance to underground is right within," Loki said. "I know approximately what lies beyond, but not exactly. We should be safe enough, but not for long. The outer city isn't as densely inhabited, but it would be best if we do not lower our guards."

Barton nodded. "'Tash and I can scope it out, as long as there's a place down there safe enough to hide."

Loki took the pendant-key around his neck and opened to his space in the Astral to their supplies. He withdrew two small silver mirrors. Closing the Astral pocket, he cupped the mirror in one hand and passed his other over its surface. It glimmered green, then faded. He repeated the process with the other, then handed both to Barton.

"Hold one around the corner and watch the other. You will be able to see everything at minimal risk."

"Thanks," Barton said. "You guys just wait for us up here?"

The captain nodded. "Try not to be gone longer than twenty minutes."

Loki showed them where to go underground, then the two assassins vanished within. No sooner had he stepped back than Thor was right at his side.

"Loki, may I talk to you alone?" he asked. His tone was gentle and even a little tender.

"No," Loki said, stepping around his beast of a brother—*Damn it, he's not my brother*—and striding outside. Thor followed closely. So not in the mood for another heart-to-heart, Loki made a vexed sound and threw the good captain a look. "I'm going to do a little scouting of my own." With that, he turned himself into a crow and took to the skies.

Whatever Thor wanted to say, he didn't think he could bear to hear it.

oOo

The darkness of the caves somehow still couldn't rival the darkness of the shadow through which they'd come. Natasha could see faint outlines of stalactites and stalagmites, but this kind of

darkness was comforting. There were hints of bioluminescence here and there, though whether the creatures giving it off were familiar or not she couldn't say.

She *really* didn't want to go into the shadow again.

The tunnel they were walking wasn't particularly big, and she could hear water dripping. At her side, she could feel Clint's general unease. Both highly trained and skilled assassins they might be, but no one had ever told them they might one day be leaving Earth to travel around the mythical Nine Realms with gods.

"It's a little hard to believe we're doing all this for *Loki*," Clint murmured.

He didn't whisper, for the sibilant hiss could travel much further than a voice. His tone was perfect for being soft and almost inaudible to carry the shortest distance possible. Natasha gave him a sideways smile.

"Tell me about it. Have you noticed how weird Stark's being around him lately?"

Her best friend blinked. "No. Weird how?"

Natasha shook her head. *Men. Such oblivious creatures. Except for Loki, it seems.* "Um, like stares at him when he thinks no one else is paying attention?"

Now Clint just looked baffled. "Why would he do that?"

Amused, Natasha lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Maybe he thinks Loki's a cool science experiment."

Clint gave her a flat look. "Seriously, 'Tash."

She grinned. "You make it too easy. *Seriously.*"

He hmphed faintly. "So stares at him like . . . a pastry?"

Natasha *almost* laughed. He had such an off-the-wall sense of humor. "You could say that. Only you *would* say that."

"Hey, I've noticed the guy likes scotch, peanuts, and pastries."

She nudged his shoulder with hers. "You notice the weirdest things."

"I notice everything," he said. "Except emotions apparently. Are you thinking Stark *likes* Loki?"

"Oh, I know he likes him. I'm just starting to wonder *how* he likes him."

Clint nodded, making a great show of thinking it over. Maybe it was her special gift, but her eyes were always more attuned to darkness than light. "We could always ask. Maybe that's why Thor's been glaring at Stark all day. Going all big-brother on him."

There was an interesting thought. She didn't have time to comment further, because around a bend ahead she could see a light that definitely wasn't bioluminescence. She needed no prompt from Clint and he needed none from her. They simply slid along the wall beside each other, and they sank down to a squat just behind the bend.

Clint eased one mirror around the rock-and-dirt wall, holding the other where they could both see it. Natasha almost gasped aloud. There was a city down here, all right. It stretched out as far as she

could see, the buildings made of some pitch black stone. Most of them were covered in what looked like glowing blue-green slime.

And for a people who didn't possess a lot of magic, the other light source came from floating lanterns. It was strange and strangely wonderful. She couldn't see any people in the immediate vicinity. Clint made a couple hand motions.

I go first, then you follow as soon as I signal?

She nodded. Quiet as shadow, Clint handed her the mirrors and dashed around the corner. She watched in the mirrors until he'd disappeared, his black clothing helping him vanish. Plenty used to being on standby and not possessed of a particularly impatient disposition, Natasha waited until she saw the barest flicker of reflection. Pocketing the mirrors, she sprinted around the corner to join him.

He was ducked in the shadows between two buildings. "This edge of the city seems pretty well deserted," he murmured. "No sounds, no movement. Who knows how long it will stay that way."

"Hopefully this doorway we're looking for isn't far from here," Natasha said. "You keep looking around, I'll go get our crew. Give me your signal in twenty minutes. That ought to be enough time."

He nodded. "Good luck."

"Same to you," she replied, running back the way they'd come down.

It didn't take her long to reach the surface, now that she knew the way better. Thor was waiting, offering her a hand.

"We found a safe enough place to wait down there," she said. "You boys all ready?"

"Loki isn't back," Thor said, thunder in his eyes.

She really didn't like it when he looked unhappy. His temper seemed more volatile than Loki's, somehow. "Isn't back?"

"Transformed himself into a crow," Stark said, "and hasn't reappeared."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a large crow swooped down out of the sky and landed on Stark's shoulder. It reached over and snapped at Tony's ear, drawing blood and quite an unmanly sort of yelp from him.

"Fuck!" he burst out, swiping the crow off. "Loki!?"

Loki materialized in a billow of grey-and-green smoke, and the crow landed on his shoulder. "Of course not," Loki said in that beautifully smooth voice of his. "Would I stoop to something so *childish*?"

He was such a darkly beautiful man. And he had completely mastered the dramatic entrance. Natasha wished it were something she could learn. He lifted his hand to his shoulder, and the crow hopped onto his fingers. They seemed to exchange something, though not a sound was made. Then the crow let out a sort of croak and took to wing. It vanished in the same green-grey smoke.

"What was that about?" Stark demanded, holding his bleeding ear.

"Animals are useful for all sorts of things," the god said, an arrogant tilt to his chin. "A lesson

humans—and Asgardians—never learned."

True enough, much as she might dislike admitting it. "Clint and I found a place to hide," she said, "so we should go now. He's keeping eyes on it."

"Fine," Loki said, seeming pleased. "I must reiterate. I cannot use magic in that city. The dark elves will sense it and swarm at once."

Only he could make an admission of vulnerability sound like a command.

Of course, just because he couldn't use magic didn't necessarily mean he was vulnerable. She'd seen him fight. His reflexes were blinding fast, and she'd seen his skill with staff, throwing knife, and scepter.

Really, there probably isn't anything he can't do.

Back down the tunnel she led her boys. At the bend, Clint gave her the signal after only a few minutes. In short order, they were in a building filled only with dust and cobwebs. Judging the lack of disturbance to either, it had been abandoned for several years.

"There's no one around," Clint told them, beginning to draw a rough diagram in the dust. "The closest people are a few blocks to the east, here. From what I could see there were about fourteen of them. They looked pretty ragged. My guess, they're this realm's version of the homeless."

"Dishonored, more like," Loki corrected. "Dark elves have a strict system of rules by which all must abide. Those who do not are dishonored and cast out. They are even more dangerous, for they have nothing to lose and would do anything to be accepted back into their society. However, they will not possess the enchanted blades of their kin."

"That's something," Steve murmured, sitting down close enough to Natasha that their shoulders brushed.

Loki straightened and started stripping off his leather armor. "Hawkeye," he said, making a neat pile, "come with me. I can sense the doorway, it's not far. I could use your eyes while I search."

Clint didn't hesitate.

Natasha followed them to the door. "Loki," she said, "I'll keep watch here. How long should we give you before we assume something's wrong?"

He seemed a bit surprised, as if it hadn't occurred to him something *could* go wrong. "Ten minutes," he said after a moment. "We will not engage the dishonored, and I should have found the doorway by then."

She nodded and gave both her best friend and best . . . enemy/ally . . . a solemn look. "Be careful."

A smile crossed Loki's pale lips. She knew by now this was a rare one—reserved for her and Stark. Well, and Jane Foster. He seemed to have a soft spot for intelligent women.

"And you as well, Miss Romanova."

Pleased he knew the correct feminine aspect of her name, she returned his smile. She watched as the two men left. Loki somehow looked smaller without his impressive armor. *I can't even imagine a scenario where he's relying on us.* Not at all one to hold a grudge, it was surprisingly easy for Natasha to stop thinking of him as a madman who'd killed 80 people.

Especially when, according to Thor, he'd done it to prevent a calamity much worse.

oOo

With a skill that came from long, long years, Clint made his way to the rooftops of the underground city. High ground was always the best place. People seldom looked *up* for intruders, he could see from a bird's eye view, and he could keep an eye on Loki while missing nothing else. He kept himself no more than a dozen paces ahead of the Aesir as he made his slow and methodical way through the outer abandoned city.

I can see why he wanted me along, he thought, pausing a moment to watch Loki's progress. The god didn't appear to be paying any attention to his surroundings. In fact, his eyes were only open slits. Clint's lips quirked in a sardonic smile. *Not that I believe for a second I could drop out of the sky and murder him. Something tells me he's not as helpless as he looks.*

He'd softened a bit toward the guy after his first debut on Earth. Knowing he'd placed a powerful enchantment on Clint was quite a security blanket. Not that he'd had the opportunity to know if it would work. He'd not heard from the shadow witch after their first encounter. Something in Thor's assuredness that Loki wouldn't break a bargain gave Clint confidence.

Shaking himself, he cast his eyes forward.

This city was a pretty interesting place. The geometrical architecture gave the place a feel of stability. Like it would still be standing in a million years. The streets were just dirt, but Clint couldn't make out shops or vendors. People didn't mill about like they did in New York or Seattle or Miami. They crossed from one building to another with purpose.

Wonder if they have jobs?

Loki turned a direction Clint hadn't been expecting, and he quickly made his way down to plant himself in the Aesir's path. "Not that way," he said, low and barely audible. "Those buildings right there are where your dishonored live."

Loki looked past him, vexation clear in his emerald eyes. "I can clearly sense the doorway now." He pointed. "In *that* building."

Clint let out an annoyed sigh. "Of course. It's right where we don't want to go. Guess we can't avoid a little scuffle, huh?"

"We can if you and Natasha are able lure them off," Loki said. "You likely wouldn't have much time to get back to the doorway."

"We can be quick," Clint assured him. Then he frowned. "Do you have to use magic to . . . open the doorway?"

The smile Loki gave him said the god was maybe a bit surprised that had occurred to Clint, and that also pleased Loki. "Yes," he said, "so once I open it, you will have to be very quick. As soon as I do, other dark elves will be drawn. If we do not enter the door soon upon opening it, it will close and disappear. I'm sure you can see why that would be an undesirable happening."

"On a whole lot of levels," Clint muttered. "I don't think we'll have enough time to lure the dishonored far enough off they can't quickly get back to you *and* beat them back *and* have enough to time to enter before the door closes. We're gonna have to fight."

Loki nodded slowly. "I concur. Fourteen is not a large number, but it is difficult to fight *quietly*."

He gestured toward the rooftops. "Perhaps you should scout the vicinity and see how close others are."

Clint prepared to ascend again. He waved down the dirt 'street'. "You look around down here."

The god made no comment to being bossed around, just did so as Clint returned to the rooftops. He again made sure he could always see Loki, and they regrouped soon.

"We're almost out of time," Clint murmured. "'Tash will come looking for us in a minute. There are people scattered around here and there, but it's hard to get an exact number."

Loki shook his head, looking pretty pissed off. "Let's go back. We will just have to exercise extreme caution when we engage."

Clint just nodded. Didn't seem to bode well that they'd just gotten started and it was already come to this.

Twenty-Fifth Installment

Twenty-Fifth Installment: Bad Omen

Steve wasn't thrilled to hear the news when Loki and Clint returned. "Guess it can't be helped," he said after a moment. "Why didn't we think to bring canisters of gas? We could put everyone to sleep and be long gone before they woke up."

Loki gave him a curious look. "Canisters of sleeping gas? You humans certainly do have the most interesting and useful inventions."

Steve almost smiled. "I don't want to have to kill unless it can't be avoided. These dark elves aren't guilty of anything except being in the wrong place."

"That won't be easy," the green-eyed Aesir warned. "Dark elves fight like demons."

Thor shifted. "Would I be able to use Mjölnir?" he asked. "I could most likely take them all out without a single casualty."

Loki gave his elder brother a faint smile, and Steve thought it looked less mocking than usual. "That wouldn't at all be quiet. There are dishonored all around that area, scattered amongst the buildings. They would arrive quickly."

Turning, Steve looked to Natasha and Clint. "Any ideas? This is more your area of expertise."

Natasha's lips pursed, and she glanced at Clint. "It's harder to quietly deal with a group. It's a quick and simple affair to pick off people who are spread out."

The captain sighed. "And we can't wait and see if they'll disburse."

At his side, Loki stirred. "I could use a silencing stone," he said, "but that would only work if you can take care of fourteen dark elves in thirty seconds or less."

"What's a silencing stone?" Steve asked, frowning.

"In short, a stone that is enchanted to silence all within the enchantment's radius," Loki explained. "It's magic, and as soon as I activate it, others will sense it. So I ask again. Could you deal with that many dark elves *very* quickly? I will need to immediately open the doorway."

Steve looked at his friends and comrades-in-arms. "We'll have to."

"Is there a point to a silencing stone?" Bruce asked. "I mean, if magic will draw dark elves anyway, why waste the time?"

Loki shook his head. "Magic will not give the dark elves in the area an exact location. Sounds of a fight will. This will buy you another ten to twenty seconds."

"Twenty seconds can make a victory," Steve said. "Do it."

Something briefly flickered through Loki's eyes that said he didn't care for the order, but he surprised the captain by offering no smart comments. "I can't cast the enchantment here." He clasped the pendant around his neck. "I will return as soon as I'm done." And he vanished into that place he called the 'Astral pocket'.

"I wonder if I'm ever gonna get used to working with him," Steve murmured, shaking his head.

Everyone, including Thor, gave him smiles that said they agreed. Natasha, never one for public displays of affection, simply bumped her shoulder against his.

Loki reappeared with a plain gray stone in his hand. He held it to Clint. "As soon as you throw that, it will activate. You likely possess the best aim."

"No likely about that," Clint said, taking the stone.

To that, Loki smiled. The *faintest*, tiniest smile, but it actually looked genuine. Steve inwardly smiled. *I think he's warming to us. Maybe we'll make an ally out of him yet.*

Using Loki's enchanted mirrors to make sure no one was coming, the Avengers slipped back down into the city. Clint used the mirrors to check over the sill of a long-broken window, and he nodded to Steve. Steve gave his companions one last glance to make sure they were ready, then he nodded at Clint.

Hawkeye threw the silencing stone into the room and leaped in after it. The rest were in right behind him.

Steve's eyes took everything in, assessing the situation in a split second. The room was enormous, and it looked like once it had been several rooms. The walls were all crumbled, creating a sort of huge anteroom. Shabby furniture was placed here and there, and a few dirty blankets hung up as privacy barriers.

The dark elves were scattered about, but they converged quickly on the Avengers. Steve saw Loki slip to the side, unnoticed by any who didn't know he was there. He moved to a protective position. Finding the doorway was more important right now than anything else, and he meant to make sure the slender Aesir didn't have any trouble.

The next thing Steve noticed was that he couldn't hear anyone. In fact, he himself couldn't speak. He gave a rueful smile. *I guess the silencing stone couldn't discriminate between friend and foe. Oh well.*

As quickly as he noticed these things, the dark elves very quickly realized it was magic. They didn't immediately throw themselves into the fight. Several of them drew back to better vantages, and Steve grimaced. Not good. He didn't need anything drawing this fight out. He charged toward the enemy closest to him, ducking behind his shield when it threw a dagger.

Fortunately, Clint didn't miss the dark elves who split off. He immediately leaped to a better vantage of his own and drew a blunted arrow from his quiver. Steve felt a pang of gratitude. Those would hurt like hell when they hit, but they wouldn't kill.

Natasha slithered through the dark elves on the ground like a living shadow, appearing behind one to wrap her arm around its neck and squeeze. A second one sprinted toward her, and she shoved her captive right into its comrade. They both went sprawling.

The good Dr. Banner had transformed, and a single blow sent two dark elves flying. It was strange to see it with no sound. Thor had dispatched a few of his own, and he was heading toward another. Steve felt a flicker of hope that this would end quickly and without bloodshed.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two of them make a mad dash for Loki. Steve whipped around, bolting to the mage's aid. He needn't have wasted his time. Loki executed a beautiful duck and roll at the last possible second, and the two dark elves collided. With near-blinding speed he delivered a

single spin-kick that took them both out.

Okay, guess I don't need to worry about him.

Perhaps because the silencing stone had a more impressive radius than Steve had supposed, no one heard the approach of others. Clint nocked one last arrow and knocked down the only dark elf still standing when small bolts came flying into the room through the large broken window on the other side of the room.

Steve couldn't keep track of them with his eyes until Clint and Natasha both staggered and went down on one knee. Steve let out a silent grunt when one scored a deep path along his thigh, sending him down as well.

Probably a good two-dozen dark elves poured in, brandishing small crossbows and oddly-shaped short swords. They had twin blades spaced probably only a few millimeters apart, and he knew they would deliver vicious wounds—wounds which would be difficult to heal.

Thor was the first to rush to meet them, and Steve had to close his eyes against the painfully bright blue-white lightning. Dark elves went flying, and Steve ducked behind his shield to avoid another pair of thrown daggers. Dr. Banner mowed into their midst, face fixed in a roar. It was one of the strangest things Steve had ever witnessed: a perfectly silent fight.

Then a sudden and short pulse of green light made the Avengers look at Loki. The Aesir had his hand pressed against an ominously black wall, and he beckoned them come. The meaning was clear, and they weren't the only ones who understood Loki had just used magic.

The random attacks of the dark elves changed as they swarmed toward the mage. Loki immediately held out his other hand, and the silencing stone appeared in it. With a flash, Steve could suddenly hear again.

"Don't worry about them!" Loki snapped. "Just hurry!"

Bruce flattened probably half a dozen dark elves as he stomped to Natasha and Clint. He scooped them both up, and Tony swept through four more with his suit as he zipped to Steve's side to offer him an arm. Thor brought up the rear, and this time it was Steve who took Loki's hand. It was slender and cool in his own.

Then that terrible, terrible darkness swallowed them.

Steve almost gasped at the sudden spike of pain. Then he realized he *had* gasped, but he couldn't hear it because the shadow had swallowed the sound. For some reason, the new wound on his leg felt a million times worse in the dark. Cold so powerful it burned spread from the injury, and Steve felt like he was drowning.

Then he was tumbling out of the dark and into yet another frozen landscape. Loki's face was gray and his entire body trembling as the rest of the Avengers fell out of shadow and into . . . wherever they were now. The green-eyed Aesir drew himself up with fury painted on his features, looking over Steve's head.

"Fool!" he snarled. "Do you have any idea what you've done!"

Startled, Steve followed his eyes to see the doorway to darkness was gone and a single dark elf was now lying on the snow, shaking like a leaf. *Damn*, he thought, struggling to his feet, *he must have followed us through*. He managed to reach Loki in time, placing a hand on the other's chest to stop him.

"Wait," he said, low and urgent. "Don't kill him. Just let him go."

"I will have to search for *days* for a new doorway!" Loki spat, shaking Steve off and once more advancing on the dark elf.

This time Steve grabbed his wrist and tugged gently. "The damage is done, can't do anything about it now. Please, Loki."

The Aesir stopped, pinning Steve with a fierce glare. He wrenched his hand free and stalked away. "*Fine.*"

Steve looked at the dark elf, who had finally gotten to his feet and was giving Thor and Dr. Banner a wide-eyed look. "You better go," he said quietly.

The fellow didn't waste time, sprinting off into the lazily drifting snow.

"Why did we exit so soon?" Tony asked.

Loki's tension was visible, even though his back was turned. "That *fool*—" he made it sound like the vilest curse—"had an anti-magic contrivance. Dark elves often carry them. Since I have to use magic to take you fools through the shadow, it caused my artificial bridge to collapse and throw us all out."

Steve didn't take his anger personally. He looked around. "Where are we? Is this still Niflheim?"

"Yes," Loki snapped. "The city is less than two leagues from here." He waved a hand. "I had planned to be in Nidavellir by tonight. It will take me three days to lead you there on foot unless I can find another doorway. Unlikely."

It made his anger quite understandable.

"We can't stay in the open like this," Thor said after a somewhat awkward silence.

Loki pointed to a nearby bluff. "I need to heal those injuries." He looked at the three wounded humans. "They will only grow worse with time."

"Can you make it?" Thor asked them.

Each nodded. Steve was grateful that exiting the shadow had caused the pain to ease off a little.

It was slow going, but soon they reached the rise in the land that provided crude shelter from the snow. Loki had all three of them sit down and directed Thor and Tony to keep watch. Bruce had finally reverted to his normal state, and he stayed close.

"This one is the worst," Loki murmured, obviously mostly to himself as he carefully peeled Clint's vest away from the wound. He placed his palm over the wound, and a pale green light sprang up.

Clint instantly relaxed. "Damn," he whispered. "That feels better already."

Loki gave him an amused look. "I haven't even started."

"Why don't our doctors have magic?" Hawkeye mused with a sigh. "This is better than a painkiller."

Loki snorted softly.

It took him maybe half an hour, and when he was done there wasn't a mark on Clint's skin. The green light faded, and Loki sat back on his heels. After a few slow, deep breaths, he turned to Natasha. Her face was drawn in pain. Steve commiserated. The pain in his thigh had grown steadily worse, and even though he'd been applying pressure constantly it had yet to stop bleeding.

As soon as Loki placed his hand over the wound and the green light reappeared, Natasha's face relaxed. "Wow," she sighed, "it really does feel better as soon as you touch it."

Loki smiled a bit. "Healing magic was my mother's specialty. I learned it well. I am likely the best healer in Asgard."

The words didn't sound boastful. They were spoken plainly and without special emphasis, a simple statement of fact. Steve found himself needing no proof to believe it. *I'm starting to feel really grateful he wasn't in earnest about conquering Earth. I think we'd all be bowing to him now if he was.* A chilling thought.

Or maybe that was just this icy realm. He almost laughed.

Loki had been working maybe ten minutes when Thor came and knelt beside him. "This locale is too open," he said. "We need to find a better place, Loki."

"We don't have time," Loki said, voice oddly serene. "The good captain cannot walk on that leg. Do you see those mountains, away to the east?"

"Yes."

"That is where we must make it by nightfall. Nights here are too dangerous to traverse. All manner of creatures prowl the open plains, and they will be all too happy of the chance for hot, fresh meat."

A thought Steve didn't relish. Thor went back to his keeping watch, and Loki continued his healing effort on Natasha. When he was done, again not a mark remained. He again paused, and Steve thought he looked a bit paler. *I hope this doesn't exhaust him overmuch.*

"You okay?" he asked, low and hoping he didn't sound too concerned.

Loki nodded, shifting so he could face the captain.

The Avengers weren't wearing typical clothing, and Steve had foregone the stars and stripes. His outfit was of a thick-yet-supple material that might be leather but felt too soft. The pants were dark gray, and finely-tooled leather boots protected his feet. The shirt was cotton with a fine-spun wool tunic for warmth and extra protection, all in muted colors of cream and leather-brown. All simple but well made.

Because, as Loki had pointed out with a glimmer of mischief in his eye, spandex wasn't practical outside of Midgard. Actually, the Aesir had said spandex wasn't practical at all. It was enough to make Steve smile at the memory.

"I'm fine," Loki said, putting a hand on Steve's thigh right below the wound.

The fingers of his other hand dipped inside the fabric, and Steve couldn't help gasping at how *cold* they were. Loki flicked him a look that might have been apologetic. But maybe it was a warning to suck it up. Hard to say with him. The Aesir carefully pushed the fabric aside, tearing it only a bit more. Each movement was gentle and delicate. It was so at odds with Steve's perceptions of Loki it was jarring. He placed his hand over the wound.

Just like Clint and Natasha, Steve's eyes closed at the instant cessation of pain. A slightly warm tingle set in his skin, pleasant and soothing. When he opened them, Loki was giving him the faintest hint of a teasing grin.

Teasing? Loki? Strange. The captain wondered if his world would ever stop growing stranger by the day and just start being normal. *Maybe strange is my new normal.* He found it difficult to think with that pleasant tingle in his skin.

As time began to elapse, Steve noticed the warmth intensified. In fact, it was just beginning to feel uncomfortable when Loki finished. He looked down in time to see the wound was gone without a trace, and Loki even repaired the hole in the pants.

And he definitely looked a little tired.

"Thank you," Steve said, getting to his feet and offering Loki a hand.

After a brief hesitation, Loki accepted and let the captain pull him up. "Thor," he called, "we need to go. Now."

His brother nodded, blue eyes on the distant horizon. "I can see a storm gathering," he said, voice tense. "Storms in Niflheim can kill mortals."

"I'm aware," Loki said, following his brother's gaze and grimacing. "Come. And hurry. We will have perhaps an hour before it is upon us."

Steve felt a sliver of unease. Enemies he could fight were one thing. Enemies he couldn't touch . . . that was another thing entirely.

Twenty-Sixth Installment: Interlude

Another citrus-y warning :D

Twenty-Sixth Installment: Restless in the Dark

It was an exhausted group who half-ran, half-stumbled into the craggy shelter of the mountain cliffs and ravines. The winds were already howling with a vengeance, and Thor couldn't help but wince at the stinging pelt of freezing rain. He knew it would be worse for his five mortal friends. All of them except Stark had small slashes across any exposed skin. It was Barton who spotted a cave deep enough to house them all comfortably, and the weary group staggered inside to collapse. Thor estimated they'd had to flat out run that last mile and a half to beat the storm.

Once they were within, Loki stood at the cave mouth and made an encompassing gesture. A shimmering curtain of green light rose up, blocking out the wind. Then he opened the Astral pocket and started depositing wood and kindling in the center of the cave floor.

"The ward will allow smoke to pass out," he said, glancing up at Thor, "so you needn't worry about the fire."

Stark had crowded close to Loki - too close, really. He'd already removed his suit. "I'm a good cook. What food ya got in there?"

The smile Loki gave Stark was *way* too indulgent and familiar. Thor caught Stark's eye and gave him a glare that had the human taking a few steps away from his brother. Satisfied, Thor tried to think what to do next.

"So," Steve beat him to breaking the silence, "what happens now, Loki? I'd like to be prepared."

Loki left Clint and Stark to build a fire and sat down in the corner. He looked weary, but not exhausted. "The last place I sensed the witch was in Nidavellir."

"The fastest way to get there would be the Bifrost," Thor suggested.

"No," Loki said, shaking his head. "Any place that Heimdall could see us, so too could Æsa. Secrecy is key, Thor. It's difficult to imagine she knows I'm coming for her, but she is a master at obtaining information in unexpected ways."

"Will this Thanos and Surtr be protecting her?" Steve asked.

Now Loki hesitated. "Thanos, unlikely. Surtr . . . of that I cannot be sure. Better to assume he will be and prepare for the worst."

Thor agreed. "Does she have a home?" he asked his brother. "A place she stays?"

"Not how you mean," Loki answered. "She stays in places abandoned, forgotten. Old temples, decaying villages, lost cities. For the last millennium or more she has been finding these places and gathering to herself bits and pieces of forgotten knowledge."

The thought rose unbidden, *It is no small wonder she and Loki are enemies. It seems they have more in common than not.*

"How did you and she become enemies?" Steve asked. "Was it really as simple as her wanting the Aether?"

"Yes," Loki said, "for she is an ancient being. Though, she bears me no ill will. She simply wants me to give her what she wants. Rather childish for a woman of her age."

Thor frowned. "How old is she? When we spoke in the dreamscape she appeared quite young."

Loki gave him a patronizing smile. "And you think it beyond her to work up a simple image enchantment?"

Swallowing a sigh, Thor just shook his head.

"I do not know her exact age," Loki said, "but she is older than Odin. More specific I cannot be." He abruptly stood. "I'm going to place a few wards around these caves so I will know if any predators come close. I will be back shortly."

Thor wanted to follow him, for there were still a few things he wanted to discuss with his brother. The timing felt wrong, so for now he held his peace and tried for patience.

oOo oOo

Clint didn't realize he was dreaming until he saw her. It was a peculiar sensation, to suddenly know he was asleep and dreaming. He couldn't remember ever feeling it before. But now, here she was and he knew. Anna. Even while dreaming he still felt the sensation of a sudden spike in adrenaline, heart beginning to race. The shadow witch looked as beautiful as he remembered.

Then he wondered, *How do I know I'm dreaming?*

Æsa came up to him, and Clint tried to act natural. He'd been wondering if he would ever get the chance to see if Loki's supposed enchantment would work. Seemed he would. How did one greet a dream? Was he supposed to remember her? *Shit, this is complicated.* She spared him having to decide how to break the silence by cupping the back of his neck and pulling him down for a kiss. Startled, Clint kissed her back while his mind spun in useless little circles.

"I'm glad you remember me, Hawkeye," she purred, low and sultry, leaning up to bite his earlobe. "You needed a break from the chains of your daily life. Would you like me to arrange a repeat performance of before? Did you enjoy watching Loki suffer? Would you like to see it again?"

"No," Clint said, grabbing her shoulders and pushing her back. "Guess I'm not in the mood."

Her eyes widened. "What?" she said, sounding half choked. "Why would you not? Say you would, Hawkeye. There is no need to deny it with me."

He felt absolutely no compulsion to do as she wished. "But I don't. And frankly, I'd be fine never seeing you again. I don't like being coerced, Witch."

The shock vanished behind a swirl of anger. "Loki," she spat. "He did something to you." She growled something that sounded like a curse. "Out-thinking me at every turn. Believes himself *so* clever. Fine, Hawkeye. Deny me. But take a message back to your keeper. Tell him I'm ready for him. He tricked me once. It will not happen again."

She vanished in a puff of orange mist. Clint watched, feeling strangely elated. *It worked. Loki wasn't lying to pacify me or something. It actually worked.* Finally, the last bit of doubt that he'd done the right thing vanished. Whatever memory thread he'd given Loki, it'd been worth it for this.

Though it would be irresponsible to do this on a regular basis, Loki entered the dreamscape instead of allowing himself to sleep. He wanted to talk to Stark, and for that they needed to be well and truly alone. He just hoped the man would unconsciously find Loki like he'd done before.

And he wasn't kept waiting long. He felt the pressure of a presence. This time, instead of drifting up into the dream, he opened his dreamscape. Stark literally fell inside.

"Whoa, what the fuck!" he exclaimed, looking around with wild eyes. "Loki? Where the hell are we?"

Smiling, Loki sat down on the stool of color that materialized behind him. "This is known as the dreamscape. Particularly, this is *my* dreamscape. All you see here is of my creation."

Stark got to his feet, looking around in open curiosity. "It's shiny." He frowned. "So, this is yours."

"Yes."

"That's real specific. Do I have a dreamscape?"

Loki couldn't help a soft snort. "You've never built one, so, no. If you dreamwalked, you could build your own dreamscape."

"And how do I do that?"

Amused, Loki watched him. "Were I so inclined, I could teach you."

"Great," Stark said. "So teach me. I want my own shiny dreamscape."

"Please focus, Stark. I brought you here to ask you something."

The human immediately shifted, looking uncomfortable. "You've noticed Thor glaring all day."

"It's distracting and irritating."

"Tell me about it," Stark grumbled. "He . . . um, well. No easy way to say it, so guess I'll just say it. He told me not to let him see me touch you again."

Loki blinked, startled. Anger quickly welled up to replace it. "He did. What would give him cause to say that, Stark?"

The man looked even more uncomfortable. "He mighta seen me staring at your lips. And I mighta been thinking at the time how I'd rather we be bent over my workstation than talking suit specs."

For several seconds, Loki just looked at him in silence. Two things vied for dominance with equal force in his mind. First, fury that Stark could be so stupid, so careless, and such a goddamned *animal* that he couldn't focus on anything but his own libido.

The second, simply, he was flattered. To be desired insatiably was something of a novelty. Stark seemed to desire him for *him*. Not for what he could do, what he was, or his position.

Irritated by these thoughts, Loki shook his head and rose to pace. "This is a completely unwanted inconvenience, Stark. Can you not control yourself?"

"I'm sorry you're *inconvenienced* by my finding you too damn sexy for my own good," Stark

growled. "Maybe you should make yourself a little less appealing, huh?"

Even though it was a bad, *bad* idea, Loki couldn't help asking, "What part of me do you find appealing, Stark? The most of which you can accuse me is being civil. Certainly not congenial."

Stark dropped down to a cross-legged position, raking fingers through his dark brown hair. "Shit, Loki, *everything* about you is appealing. You're so scary smart, you're a total smart-ass, I can't help but thinking of all the trouble we could get into if we put our heads together and you stopped being such a damn psychopath. You're interesting, you're clever, your sense of style is impeccable, you like learning, you can do magic, you're way too fucking dangerous, and you're just so fucking sexy. I keep thinking of you naked, I keep seeing that mean but sexy smirk of yours, and all I can think about is how much I want to fuck you again."

Yes, Loki thought dimly, it was a bad idea. He didn't want to hear any of that. He didn't want to know Stark felt *anything* toward him other than, sex felt good so they had sex.

"You truly are the biggest idiot I have ever met, Stark."

"Trust me, I tell myself that daily. Hourly. Hell, momentarily."

The smile that teased the corners of Loki's mouth was genuine and . . . *pleased*. This was absurd. Idiotic. Why was he settling himself within touching distance of Stark and leaning toward him?

An invitation which Stark wasted no time in accepting, either. Their lips met, and Stark immediately deepened the contact by opening his mouth and burying his hands in Loki's hair. Loki took control, and in the space of a few heartbeats bands of swirling color had Stark pinned to the dreamscape floor. He smiled.

Stark glared. "This again? I want to touch you!"

Loki's smile morphed into a smirk. "I prefer you this way."

"I think you just want to use me like a giant toy," Stark muttered, "and make sure I know it."

"Yes," Loki agreed blithely. With a wave of his hand, Stark's clothing vanished.

Then, because it pleased him to watch a helpless Stark crave him, Loki gripped the hem of his shirt and slowly lifted it to pull over his head. Strands of ebony hair fell softly around his neck as he did, and he tossed the article aside. Stark's dark brown eyes devoured every inch of now-exposed skin. Amused, Loki repeated the process even slower with the pants. He looked down to find Stark half aroused without a touch. Snorting, he discarded the last of his clothing and leaned down to nuzzle Stark's neck.

"My, you're easy to please."

"What did I just say?" Stark grated. "You have no idea how *sexy* you are, Loki!"

"I do now," Loki mused, letting his lips drift an idle path down Stark's throat. He sank his teeth into the man's collar bone.

"Fuck!" Stark yelped. "Jesus, don't tease me!"

Chuckling, it was practicality that convinced Loki not to draw this out. They both needed actual sleep. This mission was too dangerous to approach with bodies at fifty percent capacity due to lack of sleep. Even if sex was just about the best stress release in nature.

"I don't know if I would call you sexy," he murmured, now licking the vivid bruise he'd just made, "but you are certainly pleasing to the eye, Stark."

"Thanks," Stark said with a sort of breathy laugh as Loki feathered slender fingers over his chest.

Smiling, Loki leaned up and pressed his lips to Stark's.

oOo

Tony had thought their first coupling was enough to make him go crazy. It had nothing on this one. Loki hadn't *teased* him like this. This barely-there exploration with lips and fingertips was definitely going to kill him. He couldn't breathe at all. He kept trying to inhale even though he desperately needed to exhale. He was aching, and Loki hadn't touched him south of the waist even briefly.

Tony almost sobbed when Loki slowly straddled the human's hips. He wanted to touch Loki so badly it was painful. Like in his dream the other morning. Then a guiding hand was on him, and Tony squeezed his eyes shut as velvet heat descended on him. This being a dream-place didn't diminish the pleasure. He forced his eyes back open to watch Loki's face.

The god was absolutely exquisite in this state. It was somehow even better the second time. Was it wrong that he wanted to sink his teeth into Loki? To devour him like some sort of pastry, to just be all over him and see him completely and utterly let go? To give himself over to passion and pleasure and a wanton desire to just be fucked into oblivion?

That was a Loki Tony would do anything to see.

Bending his knees to plant his feet firmly on the ground, he used this new leverage to thrust his hips upward into Loki's slow downward glide. Loki's head snapped back, exposing his beautiful throat. Only a faint gasp escaped him, and Tony did it again. Harder this time. Now Loki bowed forward, chin falling toward his chest, half obscuring his face behind a curtain of ebony, silken hair. He braced his hands on Tony's chest. Then he placed his legs tight to Tony's hips and, holding himself a bit above the man, stopped moving.

Dizzy with lust and want, Tony recognized what was being offered and took it without a second thought. He was allowing Tony to set the pace. He set a punishing one. What he wanted more than anything was to hear Loki *moan*. Not dream Loki. Real Loki. This Loki. *His* Loki. And hey, he'd done exactly what Thor had commanded. *I'm not letting him see me touch his little brother. Do way more than just touch.*

He liked Thor, he really did.

But he liked Loki way more.

Especially liked him like this. Tony kept adjusting his angle, and a delicious gasp told him when he'd hit the sweet spot. He shifted his pelvis for optimum positioning and drove up as hard as he could.

Loki's head came up, once more exposing his throat, and he *moaned*.

It was faint.

So faint.

Low and barely audible.

He'd not thought he could get any more aroused. It was the single most sexy thing he'd ever heard. He'd had women who were quiet. He'd had screamers. He'd had everything in between.

He couldn't recall any of them.

"Fuck," he breathed, and did it again.

"Stark," Loki gasped, his knees tightening on Tony's hips.

Nope. *That* was the sexiest thing Tony had ever heard. It fueled his own passion, spurring him to all new heights and strength. He wanted more. He wanted *more*. He was already way too close to the edge, but he wanted - no, needed - to see Loki fall over first.

"Don't hold it in this time, Loki," he panted, sweat slicking their skin. He wondered if he would be sore tomorrow.

Green eyes met dark brown, and though Loki's countenance looked nothing but pleased, he could still see a glimmer of a smirk. And only moments later the tells of orgasm began to take Loki, and Tony tried for more speed. More force, hoping to hear one more moan.

Loki denied both wishes. Orgasm overtook him in total silence, the pleasure blooming over his face and looking very like pain. And he didn't cum. Further antagonizing Tony, he pushed down on the man's hips so he couldn't move anymore. His mouth curled into a snarl.

"Am I ever going to get what *I* want?" he demanded.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "If you feel I am too selfish, we can stop these nightly activities altogether."

Tony clenched his jaw. "Fine," he grunted. "Be a controlling asshole. But I'm a fantastic lover, Loki. Trust me, you'd enjoy yourself."

"You are not my lover, Stark. Do not mistake a night's diversion for more." So saying, he lifted himself off Tony and once more slid down his body.

The orgasm was just as intense as before. Yet somehow, Tony enjoyed it less.

Twenty-Seventh Installment

Loki's emotional deadness kills me ;A;

Twenty-Seventh Installment: Intentions, Desires, and Closing Distances

The first thing Tony did when he woke up was check under his shirt for a bite mark on his collar bone. There wasn't one, and he felt the most ridiculous pang of disappointment. He sat up, half hoping he would be the only one awake. More disappointment. Thor, Steve, and Loki were all awake, the two broader men huddled around the slim god of mischief, watching whatever he was drawing in the dirt.

Tony gathered near just in time to hear Thor ask,

"How did you even learn of this pathway's existence?"

A question which Loki rewarded with a smile more amused than malicious. "When will you ever stop underestimating me, dearest brother? What do you suppose I was learning when I read all those books? Fancy ways to make lights dance in the air?"

Thor looked sheepish. "I'd given it no thought."

Tony almost winced to hear the god of thunder set himself up for a nasty remark.

An opportunity Loki surprised Tony by not taking. He just smiled, and was it Tony's imagination or was the smile softer than usual?

"I know of many, many such pathways, lost and forgotten," Loki said. "This one will take us to Nidavellir unseen. There is, however, a slight . . . problem."

Steve huffed what might have been a laugh. "I hate problems."

Loki gave him a look full of good humor. "There is a creature who resides in the tunnel. It is a strange beast of rock and earth. An elemental. Though it isn't possessed of a particularly ill will, it is fiercely territorial. I have never had any trouble slipping past it alone. Since I will have this fine company with me, I do not expect such an easy passing this time."

Now the captain sighed. "Who would have thought *not* being Loki would turn into such a hassle."

To Tony's shock, Loki laughed. It was a low, faint sound, almost too short to be called a laugh. But it made his beautiful face look young and almost . . . gamine.

"That *is* why I'm leading this impromptu expedition, Captain. And rest assured, I will protect all of you."

"And now number one on my list of top ten things I never expected to hear from anyone," Steve said with a snort.

Tony clapped him on the back. "Good job on nailing twenty-first century language, Cap," he congratulated.

Steve threw him a smile. Then to Loki, "So, what can we expect from this elemental? How does it fight? How strong is it?"

Now Loki's smile was dry. "It fights with rock and stone," he replied, "and it is very strong. I daresay you wouldn't be able to harm it. Thor could smash it with all Mjölnir's might, and while it would crumble, in mere seconds it would rebuild itself. It is held alive by a magic as terrible and natural as Yggdrasil itself."

"Then, could you unmake it with magic?" Thor asked.

Loki went still. Tony couldn't begin to define what entered his countenance. "Perhaps," he said slowly, "but I would only attempt such as an absolute *last* resort. This is not some twisted magical experiment, Thor. It is a life that spontaneously came into being, one whose existence I am loath to end simply because it inconveniences us that it chose to dwell where it did."

He sounded for all the world like an overprotective mother. Tony had never heard him take such a tone.

And his argument was one Steve was quick to defend. "I agree. It didn't do anything wrong. So what is the best approach, Loki?"

The nearly imperceptible tension in Loki's shoulders relaxed. "I know a spell which will divert its attention and give us plenty of time to get through to Nidavellir. It will take me several moments to prepare it, so you will all serve as a distraction. Physical attacks will do little more than annoy the creature, they won't harm it."

Steve nodded, looking thoughtful.

Tony's curiosity got the better of him. "What spell?" he asked.

Loki did a fair impression of a hermit crab backing into a shell. His entire posture closed. "It . . . I do not know how to describe it. You don't have the understanding of magic to comprehend."

Though it sounded like an insult, Loki's tone of voice made it a simple statement of fact.

And while Steve was studying Loki's diagram in the dirt, Tony didn't miss the sudden look Thor and Loki shared. *It has to do with whatever Loki told Thor*, he realized, *and wouldn't tell us*. He so badly wanted to ask, but he held his tongue. As like he wouldn't be answered, and that might garner hostility from the man he definitely did not want to antagonize.

Loki shifted. "We should leave soon. The storm has let up. Thor, I want to talk to you. Alone." So saying, he rose and glided to the cave mouth.

Tony's eyes stayed glued to his ass, lamenting that his tunic fell to mid-thigh and obscured it. Then he caught Thor giving him a death glare and quickly looked away.

Damn overprotective big brothers who were also gods.

oOo

The cold snap in the air didn't register to Loki, though he wore only a linen shirt and leather tunic, breeches, and boots. He set out to the wards he'd placed, intent on taking them down and eating the magic. His brother followed close behind him, a large and familiar presence.

"Tell me, Thor," he practically purred, "whatever gave you the impression you could control what I

choose to do with my time?"

He could feel his idiot brother's confusion. "To what do you refer?" Thor asked, sounding cautious.

"Stark," Loki said. "I'm referring to Stark. I believe you told him never to touch me again?"

That obviously got Thor's back up. He could all but feel righteous anger bubbling up in the fool.

"The man is a lecher and known for his womanizing—"

Loki spun and just barely resisted hitting his brother in his stupidly square jaw. Instead he slapped his palm on the other's chest. "Stop. *Stop.*" He hissed a vexed sound. "Do you ever think before you speak, Thor?"

"Loki, I—"

"Am I a fool, Thor?"

"No—"

"And am I a frail, virginal maiden whose honor needs defending?"

"No," grudgingly.

"Then do not presume to tell me who has the right to touch me and who does not," Loki snapped. "What I do with Stark is none of your business." Then, because he knew it would pain his brother, he gave a nasty sneer. "And your warning to the man comes somewhat too late. I have already allowed far more than mere touching."

Thor colored, whether in anger or chagrin Loki didn't know. Perhaps both. "It is beneath you—"

"What?" Loki immediately cut him off. "To allow a *letch* to fuck me?"

"*Loki*," Thor growled. "You are still a prince of Asgard!"

"Spare me," Loki derided, waving a dismissive hand. "You will not ever bring it up again, Thor. Do I voice disapproval of your dalliance with your lovely Miss Foster?"

"I do *not* dally—"

"I don't care what you do," Loki again interrupted. "It isn't my business. Be she your whore or your future bride, it's *none of my business*. I respect your decision because it is yours to make. You insult and demean me when you do not offer the same. Something, I might add, you've fallen all over yourself promising never to do again."

He had the distinct pleasure of watching Thor cave in on himself in shame. He bowed his head.

"You're right," he murmured. "Forgive me, little brother."

Irritated, Loki turned from him. "I am not your brother."

He *almost* yelped when an iron fist closed around his arm and yanked him around into an equally iron embrace. "You are. And I cannot help but wish not to see you hurt."

Loki laughed at that, in genuine amusement. He placed his palm against Thor's chest and pushed back just enough to look up into blue, blue eyes. "You fear he has the power to hurt me? Let me allay just one of your fool fears, then. He does not. That is not a power I choose to bestow upon him."

Now Thor frowned. "I do not wish you to hurt *him*, either, brother. He is a good friend."

"Even though he disobeyed the golden prince of Asgard and fucked his dear little brother?"

The vulgar taunt brought thunder to Thor's eyes. "Loki."

Smirking, in quite high spirits, Loki gently pushed free of Thor's arms. "Do I offend?"

"With nearly every breath," Thor grumbled.

Loki tried to remember the last time he'd felt so carefree in his banter with Thor as he laughed. He reached his ward and began to unravel it, returning the magic to its place within him, and did not fail to note he had Stark to thank.

Twenty-Eighth Installment

Twenty-Eighth Installment: A Magic as Natural and Terrible as Yggdrasil Itself

The first half of the day passed in quiet monotony. Thor continuously scanned the horizon, eyes tracking over the cliffs and hills as the Avengers skirted the icy mountains. Though the storm has passed, the wind kept up its frigid bite. Even Loki had finally taken to wearing a cloak, though it was thinner than the heavy furs worn by the rest.

It was Clint who noticed it, during the second half of the day. "We're being followed."

None of the Avengers were foolish enough to look around in suspicion. In fact, no one even reacted to that information, other than the barest fraction of a nod from Steve. Another few seconds passed, then Loki made a low, vexed sound.

"It's the same dark elf you let live," he said, voice colored with anger. "In fact, I can sense several of them following us, spread out so as not to draw attention."

"What do we do?" Steve asked softly.

"Get rid of them," Loki said, voice hard as stone. "We're nearing the river once more. Thor, lead them on." He pointed straight ahead. "Do not deviate from this course and you'll find it easily. I will rejoin you as soon as I am able."

"Wait, where are—?" Thor tried to ask, but Loki suddenly turned into a crow and flew off into the sky.

At his side, Steve watched with a rueful smile. "Do you think he'll ever let us in on his plans before just setting them in motion?"

Right behind them, Stark snorted. "Doubt it. Where would be the fun in that? Loki's a diva."

Thor just barely managed not to level the Ironman with a heated glare. *Perhaps I should ask his intentions before making the assumption they are impure. I owe him the benefit of the doubt, and he has been a good friend and comrade-in-arms.* He sighed under his breath.

His talk with Loki earlier this morning had been unexpectedly . . . civil. In fact, Loki had acted almost loving. Like that sweet, mischievous youth he'd thought lost. *Am I getting through to him at last?* He resolved to be more careful. It wouldn't do to win his brother back only to lose him to a silly argument over a human.

A human who would live another fifty years at best.

"I saw one of the dark elves break away to follow Loki," Clint reported after a moment.

Thor raised an eyebrow.

"Good luck with that," Stark said with a chuckle. "Tracking a black crow against that dark sky? One with magic? Not gonna happen, buddy."

Thor couldn't help smile. Yes, he owed Tony the benefit of the doubt. And what if his friend had developed genuine feelings for Loki? That could only be a good thing.

As Loki had promised, the river was directly in their current path. Thor heard its rushing waters before they ever saw it, and soon enough the ground gave way to its banks. The dark water churned restlessly, and Thor halted a respectful distance away.

Not a single thing in Niflheim should be underestimated.

"What do we do now?" Natasha asked, looking around.

"Where are the dark elves?" Steve asked Clint.

Who shook his head. "Can't see them, but I'm sure they're close."

"Should we get ready for a fight?" Natasha asked, looking a tad uneasy.

"Not necessary, Miss Romanova," Loki said, and in a swarm of green and gray smoke he appeared amidst the Avengers. He was wearing his full royal Aesir armor, and he looked dark and dangerous as he stalked to the fore. "You may as well show yourselves. I know you're there, and I know I am what you seek."

He didn't shout. Actually, he didn't even raise his voice. But only a few seconds elapsed before dark elves started trickling out of the shadows and crevices. The sheer number of them startled Thor. There were over three dozen, and they did not look like the haggard dishonored lurking on the fringes of that underground city.

A tall male with broad shoulders and a shock of white hair headed the group. "Come of your own will," he said in a gravelly voice, "and your friends may pass free and unmolested." His strange, empty eyes bored into Loki's face. "We only want you, sorcerer."

Loki's chin lifted, and a slow smile crawled over his lips. "Do you know what a sorcerer is, dark elf?"

The dark elf blinked, seeming caught off guard. "One who uses magic."

Loki shook his head, his expression almost indulgent. "A sorcerer *dabbles* in magic. He dazzles his audience with tricks, illusions, and mirages. I can do sorcery. It is easy and requires hardly even a thought." With that, he lifted his arms, and a hole appeared in the air. And from that hole spewed thousands and thousands of angrily buzzing lights.

Thor recoiled in shock. "Get back!" he called to his friends.

Loki's smile was as dark and inevitable as the void he'd opened. "I am a *mage*," he hissed. "I do not merely use magic. It flows through my veins stronger than blood. A distinction you will not live to appreciate."

Thor watched in a kind of grim stupor as the frost spirits swarmed the hapless dark elves. Though they had their dangerous enchanted weapons, they were large and ineffective against such tiny, swift attackers. They tried to flee when their weapons didn't work, but the frost spirits overtook them in a matter of seconds. Blood and gore quickly splattered the ground in a grisly red carpet.

Like Thor, the rest of the Avengers had mirroring expressions of horror. Soon, even the shrieks stopped. And all the while, Loki watched with that terrible smile. In less than ten minutes, there was naught but ragged bone. The frost spirits even devoured the blood-soaked snow. When at last their frenzied activity ceased, Loki stalked toward them.

"Well done, my little friends," he said, voice low and pleased. A pale green nimbus sprang up

around him. "Did I not promise the reward would be well worth the effort?"

The frost spirits each entered the nimbus, their bright blue glow again turning green like that first day in Niflheim. Thor wondered exactly what it was Loki was doing to them. One by one they trickled back through the void behind him until they were gone. Then Loki closed the void.

"*Shit* that was the creepiest thing I've ever seen," Tony breathed.

"I think I agree," Bruce murmured.

"I believe you," Natasha said, sounding like she was offering a fervent prayer of mercy. "Loki wasn't trying to conquer Earth. I absolutely believe you."

Every one of his human friends looked as shaken as Thor felt.

Loki rejoined them. "I apologize, Captain," he said, looking at Steve, "that I resorted to killing them. It was necessary. That was an elite squadron of retrievers, and even Thor and I would have had our hands full trying to deal with them. We would not have escaped unscathed."

Tony let out a laugh, and if it was a bit higher-pitched than usual, who could blame him. "Can we bring those useful little buggers with us everywhere? We won't have to worry about that damn witch."

Loki gave him a small smile. "Unfortunately, no. Frost spirits are useless against magic, as you have twice seen. They react to it a bit like a dog being offered a belly rub."

Thor drew in a slow, stabling breath. "We should go. The smell of blood will attract other predators."

"Even though there's nothing left to eat," Clint murmured.

To which Loki flicked a dry smile. "Nothing *dead* left to eat. We are still tempting prey. And we have perhaps two hours of false light left, then we need to take shelter. We will not reach our destination today."

"Will the dark elves send others after us?" Steve asked.

"Yes," Loki replied, "when they are assured their elite have failed to take me. They will not stop until they know I am no longer in Niflheim."

"What do they want you for?" Natasha asked. "It's not like they can exactly force you to do anything against your will."

"There is no need for that," Loki said, and Thor saw his younger brother's shoulders minutely tense. "They have ways of extracting magic from a mage."

Stark blinked. "That sounds unpleasant."

"To say the least," Loki agreed. "Imagine someone draining your blood from you, just slowly enough it would constantly have time to regenerate itself. When magic is forcefully extracted or expelled, it feels as though my veins are filled with liquid fire."

"They will not take you," Thor said, low and forceful.

To his surprise, Loki gave him a faint smile that appeared genuine. "Ever my knight in shining armor," he mused. "Does that make me a damsel in distress?"

Natasha started laughing. "Somehow I think even if that were true, you'd be the most badass damsel ever, and you'd be the one saving your knight in shining armor."

Loki laughed. It was a low, soft sound, and it was pleasing to hear.

Thor chuckled. "Which would make me the damsel in distress."

To his delight, Loki's eyes were filled with mischief and good humor when he looked up at Thor. "A flowing, pink gown would look most becoming on you, brother."

It was the first time in far too long he'd said the word 'brother' without a trace of scorn, mockery, or derision. Thor's spirits soared up into a sky that, no matter how dark and cold, could not dampen them. He broke into a broad smile. "With a crown of white flowers for my hair?"

His friends and his brother laughed.

It felt almost surreal to think how, just moments ago, they'd witnessed brutal carnage.

Thor felt real hope for the first time. Adversity did have a way of bonding souls, so perhaps in a way this was exactly the thing needed to close that great yawning chasm between the brothers. It suddenly didn't feel so wide.

o0o o0o

Tony was extremely disappointed when he woke without so much as a single dream, and no dreamwalking with Loki.

He was tired of waking up cold and definitely not comfortable, but what he wanted most was to be waking up curled around a slender, pale body. Even if that made him the biggest goddamned fool in the entire galaxy. *Which I'm pretty sure it does*, he thought, shaking his head ruefully. His eyes wandered around the cave, searching for and finding Loki sitting between Steve and Thor just like yester-morning.

Though it was subtle, Loki had been colder toward Tony since their dreamwalk. *You were warmer and more relaxed when we were just fucking. Why do you have to be so damned emotionally retarded?* Only one other person had made Tony forget about his love of sex with anyone, and that was Pepper. But not even Pepper had made Tony feel so . . .

So . . .

Tangled up inside.

So damn confused.

So wary, so interested, and so fucking excited.

He raked a hand over his face and wished he was home to take a shower. Loki had been providing warmed water for them to wash up, but it wasn't the same. Then his mind helpfully added an image of himself in his shower at home with Loki. Loki, naked with water streaming down his pale, pale skin. Loki, naked and back against the slick wall. Loki, with his long legs wrapped around Tony's waist and head thrown back in bliss.

Fuck.

Thor looked over at him then, and Tony swallowed when the god of thunder rose and headed

toward him.

"I'd like a word, Stark," he said.

His voice wasn't exactly threatening, which was something. Hopefully. Loki didn't so much as look at him as he got dressed and followed Thor into the freezing morning. He pulled his heavy fur tighter around himself and tried not to assume the worst.

"I wanted to apologize for my harsh words a few days past," Thor began, folding his arms. "They were uncalled for. I will not, however, apologize for wanting the best for my brother. So I must know, Stark. What are your intentions?"

The words both were and weren't what Tony was expecting. He gnawed on his lower lip for a second, peering into the god's blue eyes. "My intentions, huh?" he said after a few moments. *Not an easy question to answer.* "Whatever Loki will allow."

Thor blinked and frowned. "What does that mean?"

Tony sighed. "It means your brother isn't the easiest person to get to open up. I don't know if he likes me or wants to kill me."

"What I want to know is how *you* feel," Thor said, voice taking on a hint of warning.

Tony couldn't help it, he laughed. "How I feel. Do you have an hour, buddy? I think your brother is nuts. He's dangerous. Hell, he'll probably be the death of me."

He rubbed a hand over his mouth and chin. "But he's under my skin. I feel like I'm on a roller coaster, like I'm tied up in knots, like I'm surrounded by a million vipers who are purring one second and sinking fangs in the next. I have no idea what to expect with him. It's giving me ulcers, and it's hot as hell." He drew in a long, slow breath. "If Loki demanded that I stop so much as looking at other people and be his lover alone, I'd fucking do it. I want him Thor. I'm going straight to hell for it, I know. But damn it, I *want* him."

Silence for a long time as Thor studied his face. What he sought Tony couldn't say. Then, "Do you love him?"

There was the question of the millennium. "I don't know. That's like asking, 'Do you love a natural disaster?' But I'm crazy about him. Or crazy for him. Or just plain crazy. Take your pick."

Thor abruptly relaxed and burst into laughter. "Ah, Stark. You are a strange man. But a good one." He sobered. "You may have placed your affections unwisely, my friend. The things Loki has been through, they have left him . . . damaged."

Tony's grin was rueful. "Tell me something I don't know."

Thor clapped him on the back. "You have my blessing. Opening up and allowing someone in will be good for him. Although, you've gotten him to lower his guard more than any of the rest of the Avengers, myself included."

Now Tony's grin was more genuine. "Part of the Stark charm, big guy. Now can we go back inside before he thinks we're plotting against him?"

Thor chuckled and waved him on.

Loki glanced at them when they entered, and the look he gave Thor bordered on hostile. "So glad

you rejoined us," he said, voice glacial. "I was just telling my fellow Avengers—" still weird to hear—"that we should reach the entrance tonight. It will be dangerous to fight the elemental in the dark, but I can help with that."

Thor nodded, and Steve rose.

"I'd like to get it over with," the captain said.

The rest couldn't but agree with that.

oOo

Loki pushed the Avengers hard during the day to reach the tunnel by dark. He found a safe cave near the elemental's lair for them to rest once they reached it, knowing the humans would need a break to be at peak fighting capacity. For himself, it was time to mentally prepare. The spell he would need to cast on the elemental would be dangerous for one reason.

The elemental's life-force came from Yggdrasil itself. The last time Loki had touched Yggdrasil, he'd nearly lost his mind.

It was not an experience he looked forward to repeating.

Unfortunately, there was no other way. The Avengers would not be able to muscle past the elemental. It was too big and too strong. As he'd known would be a recurring theme with this excursion, magic was the only solution. He sighed. *For all the trouble you've caused me, witch, it will be a delight to watch you die.*

"Loki?" Thor inquired softly.

Loki threw his brother a soft glare. "I'm fine." It was an automatic response to any overtures of concern, by now.

Thor said nothing more.

"Are we ready?" Rogers asked.

The human Avengers had huddled together in total silence, and now they rose practically as one. All eager to be quit of this place, Loki thought with a faint smile. The feeling was mutual.

"Then follow me," Loki said. "You needn't worry about keeping your voices down. The creature will not be able to sneak up on us." Indeed, it wasn't in the creature's nature to sneak at all.

The walk to the tunnel was short, but Loki extended all his senses to alert of any approaching predators. Nothing discovered them, and then they were inside the system of caves where the tunnel was. Loki opened the Astral pocket and withdrew three LED lanterns. They were brighter and far more practical than oil lamps, and Loki appreciated the ingenuity of human technology. He held one and gave the other two to Barton and Thor.

"This cavern has a nice fighting space," Rogers said. "Can we lure it out here?"

"No," Loki said. "This is not the creature's home. It will have no reason to follow us out here just to fight. As I said, it is not naturally aggressive." And if he could lure it out he would to avoid any confrontation.

In truth, Loki cared about the elemental dwelling in this tunnel. It was a bizarre creature that

probably shouldn't exist. Loki had discovered this tunnel centuries ago. To his surprise, he'd found a pool of energy that had somehow leaked from Yggdrasil—still he did not know how. A hole punctured in the realm by a fierce battle? An accident? A random chance?

It had taken Loki simply reaching out and touching it with his own magic to spark a reaction in that pool. The creature born from that reaction would probably e'er dwell here, and as far as Loki knew he was the only being alive who did not draw territorial aggression from the elemental. It let him pass as he pleased, whether out of some sort of gratitude or it simply never noticed him Loki did not know.

The tunnel itself had a very narrow opening. It required everyone to squeeze through, and Thor and the good captain both had a bit of a struggle with their broad shoulders. The first hundred meters required crawling, and Loki belatedly hoped none of them suffered from claustrophobia.

Then the tunnel widened enough they could walk, then it opened up into a fair-sized passageway. It was at this point Loki stopped them, pointing to a wan glow coming from just ahead.

"It is there," he said, not bothering to keep his voice down. "Around that bend, the tunnel is no larger than this space here. It will be best if you do not stand directly in its path, for it is far stronger than even you, Thor."

At their nods, Loki climbed up onto an outcropping at the mouth of the bend. There, less than a dozen paces ahead, was the elemental.

Rock, dirt, and stone made up a shape more or less like a man. It had a blocky head, a thick body, and thick arms and legs. The earth and stone were bound together by ribbons of bright gold light, and randomly scattered here and there were points of green light. The only evidence of Loki's magic being involved in the elemental's creation.

Loki didn't know what the elemental did all day, since it needed neither food nor sleep. It had no eyes nor ears, but it always reacted to sights and sounds. At the moment it was unmoving, and Loki wondered if he could cast his spell without it noticing his companions. Even as he drew in a breath to begin, the elemental moved.

Though it noticing him was just a complication, Loki couldn't help smile. "Hello," he whispered, making sure the others wouldn't hear. "I promise, what I'm about to do won't hurt you at all."

The elemental ignored him like it always did, lumbering toward the bend with its ground-shaking steps. He grimaced. Already knew the Avengers were there, then. He looked back at Thor and nodded, gesturing toward the creature.

Loki hoped the elemental wouldn't bring this whole tunnel down when it started fighting. It was deep in the heart of the mountain where even an earthquake wouldn't really reach, so it ought to be okay.

The elemental hadn't even reached the bend before it stopped walking and started charging. Loki resisted the urge to sigh as he began gathering the energy for the spell. The creature was alive because of magic. Of course it could detect anything else's approach.

When the elemental charged around the rock wall, the good captain barely had time to get his shield up to block the downward-rushing giant fist. His knees still buckled below the force of the blow, and Loki saw him clench his jaw.

"Be careful!" Rogers called to the others. "It's *strong*!"

"I did warn you," Loki murmured to himself.

Thor began to spin Mjölnir, and he threw it with his own impressive strength. Loki reflexively winced when it struck the elemental square in the chest, sending it staggering. A shower of dust and dirt cascaded to the tunnel floor as Thor called the Warhammer back to his hand. He prepared to throw it again, but the elemental recovered quickly and slammed both fists onto the stone floor.

It shook the whole cavern, and everyone except Thor and Loki went sprawling. Immediately, the elemental charged toward them again. This time it was the green beast who answered the challenge. The Hulk reached up with his own great fists and caught the elemental's swing. It was a striking match-up, Banner still looking imposing even though he was significantly smaller than the elemental.

The Hulk roared as he pushed against the elemental's huge fists, strength pitted against strength. The ribbons of gold light in the elemental's body flared even brighter as the elemental strained, and the points of green light glittered madly. Loki saw Barton climb up onto an outcropping like the one where Loki perched, aiming his arrows at those small points.

It was the one place on the elemental's body where the arrows would stick, but Loki knew it would serve as little more than a minor irritation to the creature—if it even noticed at all. It certainly didn't react to them. And for all the Hulk's strength, he was only slowing the elemental down.

The tight quarters prevented the Avengers from ganging up on it, and Loki could see Natasha and Stark both hanging back behind Rogers. The good captain was ready to defend them with his shield if need be, and Thor was close by the Hulk with his beloved Mjölnir. So far so good, and Loki was nearing half completion of his spell.

Then the elemental stomped down with both feet. The subsequent shaking sent the Hulk to his knees, which gave the win in the strength contest to the elemental. Thor was waiting, though, and Mjölnir struck the creature right in the center of the head. It went reeling backward several paces. Thor recalled his Warhammer and threw it again, and again the elemental was driven backward.

The ribbons of gold light in the elemental's body began to glow with a hint of red. Loki saw it through slit eyes and tensed. Though the creature didn't feel anger, its singular desire, to protect its territory, was growing stronger. It lowered its head and shoulders and barreled forward.

Like, in Midgardian vernacular, a freight train. Indeed, it bowled Thor clean over, sending him flying backward into the Hulk, but the elemental wasn't slowed by striking the thunderer. It rammed into the green beast, and Rogers was forced to use his shield to protect the others from three battering rams.

He wasn't strong enough, of course.

Loki winced but kept focus on his spell when he heard a dreadful crunch as Rogers was slammed up against the tunnel wall.

The Hulk roared and regained his feet, lunging up and shoving himself against the elemental. They ended up in a kind of bear hug, and Thor stood up with blazing eyes. Anger was not a good look on him, and it meant his brother was about to do something rash.

Lightning split the cold dark of the tunnel, and Loki flinched at the corresponding boom of thunder as it found its mark. Rock and dirt erupted in the air as it was smashed apart by the sheer force of Thor's wrath.

This victory was short-lived. The magic of Yggdrasil was far more powerful than Thor, and in the time it took Loki to blink the elemental had rebuilt itself. The ribbons of gold were now crimson.

Loki opened his mouth to cry warning, daring to shift focus just long enough for that.

It came a split second too late. The elemental tore a huge chunk of rock out of the tunnel wall with blinding speed and hurled it toward the Avengers. Loki watched in a kind of bemused horror as it all happened with surprising quiet. Rogers was already down, so he could do nothing to shield the only two people left in the way: Stark and Natasha.

Twenty-Ninth Installment

My last chapter had a terrible cliffhanger, I know.

Twenty-Ninth Installment: Unraveling

The elemental tore a huge chunk of rock out of the tunnel wall with blinding speed and hurled it toward the Avengers. Loki watched in a kind of bemused horror as it all happened with surprising quiet. Rogers was already down, so he could do nothing to shield the only two people left in the way: Stark and Natasha.

Screaming. The entire realm was screaming. Cold bit bone-deep into every pore. Liquid heat covered all in white-hot fire. The center of the sun exploded, and the burst of blue and violet light shocked Loki to the core. The beginning and the end crowded into one tiny drop in an endless ocean. He could see *everything*. Everything that had ever been.

He could see nothing. All was lost to darkness and black.

Stop. *Stop*. No, he couldn't do this. Not now. Not again. He had a promise to keep.

You'll fight for me, won't you?

Stop.

Ribbons of fire.

Lines of agony.

Harsh light.

Harsher voices.

Stop.

Falling.

Flying.

Dying.

Living every life all at once.

Everything.

Nothing.

STOP.

Loki almost sobbed as he drew in a labored breath. The smell of blood was sharp and copper-bright, making his eyes water to have something real to suddenly hang onto. Opening his arms, he completed his spell. A tapestry of shimmering golden threads draped around the elemental, and it went still.

"Now!" Loki gasped, trembling from head to foot as he climbed from his perch.

"Banner!" Thor cried, sounding aggrieved, "help me with this boulder!"

Loki couldn't look. He was afraid if he saw red, he would collapse into madness and not rise. He went to the captain's side and knelt, placing a hand on the man's knee. "You'll be all right," he whispered, glad his voice wasn't shaking. "Can you walk?"

Rogers looked at him with pain-glazed eyes. "Pr-probably not for long," he gasped. "I think my ribs are broken."

"A trifle to heal," Loki murmured, gently lifting the captain's arm around his neck. "We need only walk one-thousand meters and we're free of this place."

The man wasted no more breath speaking, just nodded. He groaned when Loki heaved him upright, but he kept his feet, and Loki retrieved the fallen shield. *Just a little longer*, he thought over and over. A mantra. He only needed to keep the madness at bay just a little longer; then he could release the spell and the madness would dissipate.

Trusting that Thor was following, Loki helped Rogers past the frozen elemental and on down the tunnel. The lantern he'd clipped to his belt let out a harsh light that made the air feel colder, somehow. Steadfastly ignoring the chaos gnawing at his heels, Loki kept walking, kept his eyes closed. Tried to take as much of the captain's weight as he could. He had a promise to keep. He would protect the Avengers.

It was the bargain he'd made.

He'd keep it.

You'll fight for me, won't you?

No. Stop.

You're almost ready.

He bit his lip so hard he tasted blood.

Then, so suddenly it startled him, a blast of warm air hit his face. He opened his eyes and blinked to find himself standing on a shallow ledge high in the mountains of Nidavellir. He swallowed thickly and looked around. So focused he'd been on getting out of that tunnel, he hadn't considered where it led. Healthy Avengers could make it down no problem, even though the way was steep.

Three mortally wounded ones could not. The way down might very well kill them. As carefully as he could he eased Rogers down in one corner of the ledge. The man looked barely conscious, and he didn't react to the change.

Slinging the shield over his own back just to keep it out of the way, Loki made to head back into the tunnel. However, he'd only taken a few steps when the Hulk appeared. It was almost strange to see him cradling Natasha in his green monster form—his bestial nature at odds with the gentle way he held her. And Loki felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

She wasn't simply bruised or banged up. A wound on her left temple was bleeding, and both her left arm and leg were grotesquely mangled. He could see muscle and bone, though all damage was isolated to her left side. As if someone had tried to protect her.

Loki quickly moved out of the way, gesturing the Hulk to stand near the captain. He already knew Stark wouldn't be any better off. His suit would be little more effective than aluminum foil at protecting against strength fueled by Yggdrasil.

Barton came next, appearing dirty but uninjured. His eyes took in the ledge and summed up their predicament in a single word: "Shit."

Loki almost laughed, but he wasn't sure if it was his own morbid sense of humor or the madness behind the desire, so he didn't.

Thor came last, and Loki wasn't surprised to see even his brother hadn't escaped without shedding some blood. Only when Thor had stepped out onto the ledge did Loki finally let go of his spell holding the elemental. It took every iota of self-control he possessed not to let go of himself, as well.

"Loki," Thor said quietly, looking over the ledge, "we'll never make it all that way."

"I know," Loki said, looking at the still form in Thor's arms.

It was difficult to tell the extent of Stark's injuries with his suit in the way, but he didn't expect it to be pretty.

"What do we need to do?" Barton asked.

There weren't many options. Loki was a master manipulator of form, he could easily change his shape into a winged creature and fly the three injured Avengers down the cliff face. It would expend enough energy that he would have to rest between the three healings and take far longer. Natasha and Stark may not have enough time for that.

Likewise, he could call one of the many winged creatures that dwelled in Nidavellir, but who could say how quickly one would come?

"I'm okay, Loki," Rogers croaked from the corner. "Worry about them."

He coughed a little, and Loki saw blood fleck his lips. Not okay, but probably still better off than the other two. Loki looked at the three Avengers still on their feet.

"Wait for me down there," he said, gesturing. "I'll need space. I don't have the time to move them."

"Can you heal them all at once?" Barton asked.

"No," Loki said. *If only it worked that way.* "Find a safe shelter and build a camp. Thor, come back up here for me when you're done."

They nodded. There wasn't much room on the ledge for the three wounded humans and Loki, but he could make it work. Beginning with Stark, he started removing the suit. He was less than half done before he encountered his first problem. The suit was crumpled at the site of impact, buckling inward. A disfigured chunk of metal was lodged right through Stark's back.

His spine wasn't severed, but Loki could see it was damaged. There would be massive internal injury.

Taking a slow, deep breath, Loki turned to Natasha to examine the extent of her injuries. Though still severe, hers weren't as immediately dangerous as Stark's. Lightly touching her forehead, he placed a simple enchantment to keep her asleep. If she woke, the pain would be excruciating. Then

he did the same for Rogers, and the man slumped into unconsciousness.

As carefully as he could, Loki rolled Stark onto his belly. The space on the ledge was tight, so he wound up shifting the man to rest with his head on Loki's lap. He left the shrapnel where it was for the moment. It was holding the man's insides inside.

Then he steadied himself and began. Cool and calm and natural, his seiðr welled up inside him. He sent it streaming into the broken body lying before him, and immediately it sent him information. Massive internal hemorrhaging. Multiple broken bones, some crushed. The shrapnel had nicked Stark's spine, causing bone and nerve damage. He almost smiled.

If I were a doctor and not a god, he would never walk again. If I could save him at all. Even with his advanced healing capabilities, the human's life was slipping away beneath his fingers. It took him a handful of seconds to realize he may not win the race.

Already knowing this was a terrible and cruel solution, Loki sent a trickle of seiðr up into Stark's brain. The man's entire body jerked as he came awake. He let out a sound like a strangled cry, flailing until Loki grabbed his hand and squeezed just to let him know he wasn't alone.

"Don't move, Stark," he murmured, allowing his seiðr to deaden Stark's nerves to the pain only a little.

"Loki?" came the slurred inquiry. "Whaa . . ."

"I'm sorry," Loki said softly, and he meant it, "but you have to stay awake. If you sleep, you'll die."

A faint laugh that sounded almost drunk. "TERRR . . . ible bedside manner."

Loki couldn't help a small smile. "I'm sure I could find some half-naked nurse to fawn over you if that would be more to your liking."

"No," Stark said, the word muffled. "Don' wan' no one bu' you. Idio'."

"I think that makes you the idiot," Loki said, smile softening. "Are you falling for me, Stark?"

"Mm."

Though that could mean anything, Loki suspected it was a confirmation. He let his seiðr flow into Stark as strongly as he dared. A human body could only handle so much, after all. Yet, still he could feel the life energy pulsing in Stark weaker and weaker. The man's eyes fluttered shut and didn't reopen.

Loki dug his fingers into a deep gash across Stark's shoulders. "Do *not* fall asleep," he ordered quietly.

Stark groaned. "But 'm tired," he whined, barely audible, "an' it *hurts*."

"Deal with the pain or die," Loki warned.

"Did a mountain fall on me?" Stark mumbled.

Loki couldn't help another smile. "Nearly."

"I'm gonn' sleep now."

"No."

"Y'wanna stop me, kiss me."

Snorting, Loki shook his head. "You're being very distracting for a dying man."

"You're hot. If 'm gonn' die, wann' kiss first."

"You're not going to die."

"Then why're you talkin' so sweet?"

"Not thirty seconds ago you complained of my bedside manner," Loki pointed out, pleased to feel Stark's life essence strengthening a little as he continued to work.

"Yeah, so kiss me."

Loki just smiled. "Live, and I'll kiss you all you want."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"So, we have a bargain?"

The situation was so absurd, so dire, and so utterly *Stark* that Loki couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, Anthony. We have a bargain."

"Shi'. You called me 'nthony."

"It is your name."

Stark just made some incomprehensible sound. "Can't you heal me on m' back? So I c'n look a' you?"

"No. There's a chunk of metal keeping your insides where they belong."

"Shi'."

"Indeed." Another thirty seconds in silence, and Loki slowed his pace. Stark's essence was pulsing stronger now, and while he was nowhere near safe, he would not expire in the next few minutes.

Weaving strands of seiðr into a kind of healing net, Loki placed it over Stark's injuries to keep them from bleeding or worsening. Then he carefully slid from under the man. "You can sleep now," he whispered.

Gingerly, he made his way to Natasha. Her injuries numbered fewer, but like Stark she'd lost a lot of blood. Her shoulder and hip were both crushed. Loki closed his eyes as he sent his seiðr flowing down into her. As he'd done with Stark, he wove it into his healing net. Given enough time—about a month—this net would heal her all on its own.

Of course, they didn't have that kind of time. But it would work on her while Loki gave Stark all his attention. He did the same for the captain, then returned to Stark's side.

Stark had fallen asleep, and this time Loki let him sleep. Placing his hands on Stark's back, he closed his eyes and delved once more into his task.

Inside all the realms were energies that pulsed strongly with life. These energies were weakest in

Midgard, since there was no magic there. But here in Nidavellir they were strong, and Loki opened his senses. Instantly, it poured into him. Life everywhere. Creatures, plants, insects, and all the beings who dwelled here. He let himself melt into the flood, opening himself as a channel for this powerful energy to flow into Stark.

It was a dangerous thing to do under normal circumstances. It was even more so in a situation like this. But this was the quickest way to stabilize the man so he could safely remove the damaged suit. *I suppose I should be grateful this happened in Nidavellir. The dwarves will likely be thrilled to repair the suit. They'll have never seen anything like it.* It was a fleeting thought.

Burning hot and fiercely potent, the energy poured through Loki and into Stark. This wasn't so much healing as erasing injury, a distinction that was fine and would be appreciated by Stark if he was awake. It would feel intensely painful. There was no other choice.

Torn arteries closed, shredded muscle mended, broken skin healed. When Stark was more-or-less put back together, Loki eased himself out of the flood of energy and cut it off. All color had drained from Stark's face, leaving behind a somewhat pasty pallor.

Now came a task the likes of which Loki had never performed before. He'd cut away all of the suit that wasn't lodged in Stark's body, but there was still a large piece left behind. Extracting it without causing more damage would be a terrific feat of magical agility. And what would come after was actual precision healing, and crushed bones took time. It was like building a puzzle with no picture. He tried not to think about what this was going to cost him since he'd have to do it three separate times.

Loki closed his eyes, gripping the chunk of metal with one hand and placing his other palm flat on the damaged flesh alongside it. Ever-so-carefully he wove strands of healing seiðr all around it, all to minimize the damage caused when he pulled the metal free. It took longer than he would have liked, but eventually it was done. Then he cupped the metal itself with seiðr and lifted.

There was no sympathetic upwelling of blood; Loki's spell was too complete for that. But the terrible wound left behind when the metal was gone made the god wince. Even with all his skill, this wound might prove fatal. Shaking his head, refusing to think like that, he focused only on the healing in front of him.

oOo

He'd had plenty enough of caves, so Thor didn't search for shelter in the shadow of the mountains. Nidavellir wasn't known for cold weather this time of year, and the sky was perfectly clear. He found an open space amongst the trees, and his two human friends helped him clear it of debris. The loose branches and twigs would make tinder for a fire, and they collected stones for a fire pit.

"This is a perfect spot," Banner said, looking around.

Loki had somehow enchanted the doctor's clothing so it grew when the Hulk did. It also shrunk when he returned to his natural state. Really, the number of useful things his brother could do were endless.

Clint was looking toward the nearby river. "I could fish," he offered.

Catching their own food wasn't necessary thanks to Loki's Astral pocket, but Thor nodded. Eating was a distraction. And while the Hawkeye busied himself, Thor knelt by the water and washed his face of blood and dirt. Banner mimicked.

"Do you think they're okay?" he asked quietly.

Thor closed his eyes, hands resting on the wet riverbank. He knew what a dying man looked like. He looked like Stark. Raking fingers through his hair to wet it as well, Thor took a deep breath and refused to think negatively.

"If anyone can save them, it's Loki."

Bruce abruptly let out a short laugh. "This is all so surreal. That guy is completely responsible for turning my life upside down. First by being my enemy and now by being my ally."

Thor couldn't help laughing, too. "It's his gift. Nothing is ever clear with my brother. I think he enjoys watching the fallout from the chaos he causes."

"You can say that again," Clint snorted from his spot near them. He'd already caught two trout. "And even though it's weird, I'm *real* grateful to him."

Curious, Thor looked at him. "For the enchantment he placed on you?"

Like a striking snake, Clint stabbed down with one of his arrows. He skewered his third trout with apparently no trouble. "Yeah. Guess I forgot, but the shadow witch appeared in a dream again. Same MO. She tried to convince me to hurt Loki, but this time I wasn't even tempted. Her trick didn't work." He looked at Thor, and his eyes were fervent in their gratitude. "I know I gave Loki something he wanted, and whatever memory I gave him was worth it."

The impulse to smile couldn't be denied, and Thor didn't try. "He would say helping you wasn't his intention, but it doesn't diminish the fact that he has been helping people for the last ten months."

Both Clint and Dr. Banner smiled.

"Wonder if he could do anything for me," Bruce mused.

Thor clapped his hands to his thighs and rose. "I think I will try to find boughs for bedding. Our friends will all need to rest when Loki is done healing them. They've still lost blood and will need a few days to recover."

Not to mention Loki. Thor knew what happened to his brother when he performed significant magical tasks. It drained him. Healing three mortally wounded humans all at once . . . He tried not to think about that, either. Loki wasn't weak.

In his way, he was as strong as Thor. Perhaps stronger.

Pain unexpectedly bloomed in Thor's breast as he gathered pine boughs. *If he could put aside his rage, he would make an excellent king.* He immediately thought of furious, tear-stained admission. *"I never wanted the throne. I only ever wanted to be your equal!"*

In truth, those words haunted Thor more than the attempts on his life. The notion that he had driven Loki to such despair was more than painful. And whether he thought it was true or not didn't matter. Ignorance was no excuse. Not with Loki.

It took him only half an hour to gather enough branches. He wove them together into three passable mattresses, and once covered with furs they'd be tolerably comfortable. As he finished, Clint crouched by his side.

"How about you make one for all of us?" he said, smile only half joking.

Thor didn't know what else to do with himself, so he acquiesced just to have something to occupy himself. Bruce helped, and then they ate the trout Clint had caught. Thor estimated enough time had elapsed and rose.

"I'm going to make sure they're all right, see if Loki needs anything," he told his two friends. "Most of the large animals in this part of the realm are herbivores and not dangerous."

They just nodded, and he could tell they were really only thinking about the rest of the Avengers, too.

It would have been quicker to use his hammer to fly up, but there wasn't enough room to land anywhere so Thor climbed back up to where his brother was. It was time-consuming, the cliffs were high and steep. When he reached the ledge, he found a place he could stand and pulled himself up.

The three injured humans were all lying side-by-side. Loki had wedged himself between Stark and Natasha, the captain's shield still slung over his back, forgotten. A fine green mist hovered over Steve and Natasha, Thor suspected it was keeping them stabilized while Loki worked on Stark.

The same green mist flowed from Loki's hands down into Stark's body, the mage's eyes open only the merest slit. Brilliant green lines of light were slowly working up Loki's arms, looking for all the world like glowing tattoos. Thor knew this was the seiðr flowing in Loki's veins, strongly visible as he channeled the magic. The lines had crept up Loki's neck and cheeks, as well.

"Loki?" Thor asked, *very* quietly. If his brother could safely be interrupted he would hear; if not, he wouldn't be disturbed.

Loki didn't move, but he obviously heard. "It's not safe to move them," he said. His voice didn't sound as strained as Thor had feared. "The captain's ribs are broken, and one of them punctured a lung. He's all right for the moment, but he'll need my attention before long. Moving him will kill him."

"What about Natasha?" Thor asked, still keeping his voice low.

"So far she's better off than the other two," Loki replied. "Only minimal internal hemorrhaging, worst injuries are the broken bones. She has a concussion, but she's stable."

"And Stark?"

He saw his brother draw in a deep breath. "Still haven't stabilized his condition," Loki said softly. "His suit crumpled like an aluminum can. I *will* save him." The lines of seiðr burned even brighter.

Thor felt a pang. "Do you need anything?"

"No," Loki replied. Then, "Keep watch. I cannot defend myself and three injured humans all while healing them."

Helpless. Thor reflexively gripped his Warhammer. "I will not let anything happen to you," he vowed softly, settling himself on the tiny outcropping he'd found. "I'm right here if you need anything, brother."

Loki's lips turned up in a faint smile. "Comforting."

There was no scorn in his voice.

Thirtieth Installment

Special shout-out to **pinknoonicorn** and **salenastarzz**, your comments made me grin like a fool. Thank you to all my wonderful readers/commenters.

Thirtieth Installment: Descent and Ascension

Captain America, as it turned out, had gained more than an impressive physique during the experiments. He'd gained a regenerative capability. It wasn't nearly as fast-working as Loki's own, but when Loki left Stark long enough to heal a punctured lung he was surprised to find Rogers' body was already attempting to heal itself.

The damage was too extensive for a successful attempt, but it gave Loki a much-needed respite. All he had to do was repair the hole in the human's lung and set his broken ribs in their correct places. Then he opened his Astral pocket and withdrew clean white bandages and a waterskin. He beckoned to Thor.

"It's safe to move him, now," he said. "Can you get him down to the camp you set up without jostling him too much? Dr. Banner will just need to bind his ribs and they'll finish healing on their own in a day or two."

Thor nodded, gesturing to the shield. "Let me take that, too."

Loki had forgotten about it. When he handed it over, the lack of weight was nice. He was already wearied, and he had a lot of work before him yet. Thor lifted Rogers as if he were a featherweight, taking the water and bandages. When he was gone, Loki shifted the two remaining humans to more comfortable positions.

Now, he had a choice to make. Stark still needed more attention than Natasha. But if he finished healing Stark, he may not have the energy to heal Natasha until he'd had at least one night of sleep. As they were, neither of them could afford to wait an entire night for him. His net of healing seiðr was not a solution. It was a Band-Aid, nothing more. And when his seiðr ran out, the net would fail.

For a second, he closed his eyes. The more pressing concern was something else entirely. He'd touched the magic of Yggdrasil again. Right now, his own magic had been amplified, like a human whose bloodstream had been flooded with adrenaline. It wouldn't last, and he wasn't at all sure what would happen when he came down.

I can't think about that right now. Now, he needed to work.

oOo

Steve opened his eyes and was pleasantly surprised to find the pain that had been dogging him greatly diminished. Breathing was no longer such a task. His ribs warned him he couldn't move around too much, but he was able to half sit up and look around. He was in a forest clearing on a passably comfortable mattress of what looked like pine boughs and furs, and it appeared to be almost dusk. A warm fire crackled nearby, and he felt a pulse of relief to see Dr. Banner and Hawkeye both there and seemingly unharmed.

"Hey, welcome back," Bruce said with a small smile.

Steve glanced at his body and saw the binding around his chest. He frowned a little. "What happened? Where are Stark and Natasha?"

Clint pointed west. "They're still on that ledge with Loki. Thor brought you down about two hours ago, said your worst injuries were healed and your own regenerative abilities would do the rest."

Frowning, Steve looked through the trees, trying to spot the cliffs and ledge. No luck. "I told Loki not to worry about me."

Bruce shifted. "You weren't much better off than them," he said quietly. "Loki is racing time up there, and he's probably gonna be pretty drained when he's done."

The words weren't spoken, but Steve felt them heavy in the air nonetheless. *If he can save them.* He felt a tightness in his chest. *Natasha's up there, fighting a battle I can't help with.* He couldn't help Loki, either. It was so far outside his capabilities.

"They'll be okay," Clint said abruptly. "It's Loki."

The confidence in his voice made Steve smile a little. "How are you two doing with all this? I mean, I'm pretty sure this is the strangest thing *I've* ever done. You?"

Bruce snorted faintly. "Yeah, I think so. But it feels . . . I don't know. We're doing the right thing. If anything comes of what happened to me, I'd rather it be good."

Clint nodded. "I agree. Didn't think I'd ever be contemplating trusting Loki, of all people. But I gotta say, he keeps pullin' through for us."

Steve nodded absently. "Do you think he'll ever feel like one of us?"

The three men all mulled that over. Bruce broke the silence first. "Didn't think I'd ever say so, but look at us. We're relying on him, he's relying on us. The world couldn't get any stranger."

That made Steve smile. "Can't really argue with that."

Clint stirred. "I hate this. I really wish we could go up there and help somehow."

"We'd only be in the way," Bruce said, staring at the fire and looking almost melancholy.

Practically desperate for a distraction, Steve gestured toward a little pile of fish bones by the fire. "Any chance there's some of that left? I'm pretty hungry."

Rising, Clint picked up his quiver. "I can catch a couple more. Banner?"

The doctor shook his head. "No thanks."

Hawkeye nodded and left the clearing. Steve closed his eyes and tried not to think dark thoughts.

oOo

As the sun inched toward Nidavellir's horizon, Thor wondered if Loki would need light soon. He'd been sitting at Natasha's side, unmoving, for two hours now. The glowing lines of seiðr were pretty much spread over every inch of visible skin on Loki's body, green light flowing from his hands into her body as he moved them.

There wasn't any physical evidence of injury on her flesh by now. Thor knew Loki would be working on the internal injury, though how difficult it was he truly had no idea. Aside from the

glowing seiðr, Loki didn't look any different from usual.

It was hard to sit still. Thor continuously scanned his surroundings, making sure there were no threats, but that wasn't easing his anxiety. It took a great deal of self-control not to ask how things were progressing every five minutes. That would distract Loki from his task, and likely it would get Thor shoved off the ledge.

Patience, he kept counseling himself. *Just be patient. He will let you know if he needs anything. And right now he needs you to be alert, not pestering him with pointless questions.*

Presently, the sun disappeared and dark settled in. Thor didn't ask if more light was needed. Again, his brother would let him know if it was. And, well, Loki's eyes had been closed for the last two hours anyway. *I suppose light isn't going to make any difference.* Since Thor didn't need light either, he remained silent. His night vision far surpassed that of a human.

Eventually, his patience paid off. Loki *finally* stirred, and the glowing lines of seiðr abruptly vanished from his skin. He straightened, and Thor almost cringed to see how exhausted he looked.

"It's safe to move her now," he said, voice dry and a bit thin. "Take her to the campsite you made."

"You need to rest," Thor protested when Loki didn't pause before going to Stark's side.

"I need to heal him," Loki said. "Please take her, Thor."

"At least eat and drink something," Thor insisted.

"I've already left Stark as long as I dare," Loki said, starting to sound irritated. "He doesn't have time for me to have a snack."

"Drink, then," Thor wheedled. "You'll do no one any good if you keel over from exhaustion. We're stranded here without you, Loki."

His brother flashed him a wry smile. "Hardly." But he pulled a waterskin from his Astral pocket and took a long drink. "Now go. I could use the extra space."

Sighing under his breath, Thor gently lifted Natasha into his arms. It took quite a feat of dexterity, flying with an unconscious person. He was up to the task, and he landed as gently as he could at the base of the cliffs. Her weight was less than the captain's, which meant carrying her to the camp wasn't even slightly wearying.

The three waiting humans all looked up when he entered, and he gave them smiles. "She's going to be okay," he told them, laying her on the impromptu mattress beside Steve.

The captain reached over and brushed red hair off her forehead before giving Thor a serious look. "Stark?"

Thor took a deep breath. "Still gravely injured."

A heavy silence. "And Loki?" Steve asked at length.

Thor stared at the fire. "I can see he's growing tired, but he refuses to rest." He looked at his three friends. "He will not let Stark die, I promise you."

Despite the gravity of the situation, he could see the words comforted them.

She had only the vaguest memories of a heat so intense as to nearly be unbearable. A pain so crushing it felt like dying. A look of startled alarm on Loki's face as a creature made of rock and earth hurled a boulder at her like it was just a pebble. And Stark ramming into her to push her to safety.

Natasha opened her eyes to a dark forest canopy. The orange-golden illumination accompanied by crackling could only be a fire, and she was no longer lying on cold stone. She closed them for a moment, and her memories returned. The heat could only be magic. Loki's healing magic. *He saved my life.*

She sat up fast—a little too fast judging by the wave of dizziness. She ignored it, eyes seeking and finding Steve. His ribs were neatly bound, sitting right beside her. He looked a little startled by her sudden movement, then he smiled.

"Welcome back. How do you feel?"

"Not entirely terrible," she said, experimentally rolling her shoulders. "How are you guys? Everyone still in one piece?"

"Mostly," Steve said, looking to the west. "We're just waiting to hear about Tony."

She noticed the two Asgardians were missing, too. "Where are they?"

"Still up on the ledge where we came out," he told her. "Tony's the only one still hurt."

Reaching over, Natasha brushed the bandages. "He couldn't heal you all the way?"

"Thor told us he's trying to conserve energy," Bruce said from by the fire. "You're not back to one-hundred percent either, so take it slow."

Easier said than done. It was one thing to be out in the wilderness on Earth. She knew what kinds of predators haunted the forests, and humans weren't anything she couldn't handle. This wasn't Earth. She had no idea what might be out here. The day had officially come where she missed Loki.

"Where's Thor?"

"Watching over Loki and Tony," Bruce said. "Thor did say there aren't really any big predators in this forest. Comforting, I suppose."

She snorted. "I'm starving. Is any of that trout for me?"

Clint, who'd been staring off to the west, blinked. "Yeah. And there's water, too."

Tearing into it, Natasha looked at her three friends. "Does anyone know where we are?"

"Thor mentioned this realm is home to dwarves," Bruce offered, sounding slightly incredulous. "Wonder if they look anything like we've imagined?"

"Somehow, I doubt they're funny little bald men with pickaxes who like to whistle while they work," Natasha said. The trout was delicious. Maybe she was just that hungry.

They all laughed quietly.

"Tony told me they're the ones who helped Loki forge his new staff," Bruce said after a moment. "I hope they'll be able to help repair the suit. It was . . . pretty banged up."

Natasha felt a pang. She and Stark didn't always get along, but he was a partner. A friend. A fellow warrior protecting Earth from the terrible things out there that might threaten it. She blinked when a hand squeezed hers, and she looked up into Steve's warm, gray-blue eyes.

"He'll be okay," he murmured.

She smiled a little. "Yeah. Guy's too stubborn to die."

The three men all grinned.

oOo

It was impossible to tell, but Thor estimated three hours had passed since he came back to watch over Loki and Stark. His brother hadn't moved, eyes remaining closed. For the first two hours or so, everything appeared to be fine. Then, so slowly Thor hadn't noticed at first, he started seeing changes.

The green lines of seiðr were paler, and the glow was fainter than it had been. Perspiration had beaded on Loki's skin, trickling down his face. And his complexion was gray. The lines on his forehead and the slight twist to his lips gave him an expression of pain he was trying to either hide or ignore. And tension had made every muscle go taut.

He was suffering, now that Thor looked closely it was plain. The elder's heart ached. In Asgard, a single mortally wounded man might have five different healers in attendance. He knew little about magic, but his mother had told him once healing was the most difficult and draining of all abilities.

"Healing isn't about producing an effect like most spells," she'd said. "It's a transference of vitality from one to another. A mage pours her healthy seiðr into the wounded man to boost his life's energy."

At the time, those words had been meaningless to Thor, beyond understanding. Or even caring, to his shame. Magic was just some nebulous thing that women—and Loki—did. It had little bearing on the life of a true Aesir warrior.

Like about so many things, he knew now how wrong he'd been. For the first time in his life he wished he had some magical ability, some way of transferring his own vitality into Loki to aid his brother. No matter the cost to himself.

Time seemed to slow, dragging seconds to minutes and minutes to hours. It grew increasingly difficult for Thor to focus on anything but Loki, afraid if he divided his attention even a little he'd miss something. Some change in either Stark or Loki that would turn out to be important. The anxiety was starting to make him feel ill.

Not something to which he was at all accustomed. Aesir didn't get ill.

It happened sometime after the fourth hour had slid by. Thor was just considering getting up and moving around a little in hopes of soothing his own anxiety. The lines of seiðr on Loki's skin abruptly flickered and vanished. He let out a quiet sound that almost sounded like a choked sob of pain.

Then he collapsed.

Thirty-First Installment

So, I didn't make you wait very long. ;)

Thirty-First Installment: All Over Again

The lines of seiðr on Loki's skin abruptly flickered and vanished. He let out a quiet sound that almost sounded like a choked sob of pain.

Then he collapsed.

"Loki!" Thor cried, lunging from his corner. With no source of light he drew Mjöltnir and charged her, holding the Warhammer a safe distance from the two unconscious men.

No evidence of injury to Stark's person remained. The terrible, ragged wound on his back was gone, nary a scar left behind. There was color to his skin again, though he seemed a bit too pale. Natural, given the blood loss. He was breathing evenly and deeply, no sounds of distress any longer.

But Loki . . .

With a hand that trembled only a little, Thor felt for a pulse. It was weak and racing far too fast, reminding the thunderer of a trapped bird.

For several paralyzing seconds, Thor didn't know what to do. His renewed protective instincts demanded he take care of his brother. Realistically, Stark needed his help more. Humans were so, so much more fragile than the Aesir. It took effort, to set aside his personal feelings. As gently as he could, he shifted Loki off Stark.

He moved Loki to the furthest corner of the ledge, away from the edge so he wouldn't accidentally fall off. Then he scooped Stark up into his arms, hoping it was safe to move him. He couldn't *see* any injury, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. As fast as he dared he raced back to the camp, and the four humans waiting all sat up.

Thor wasn't surprised to see them still awake, and he carefully lowered Stark onto the makeshift mattress. "Please look after him," he said, looking at Bruce. Without explaining further, he turned and bolted back out of the clearing.

He could move with astonishing speed. Why was it, in times like these, he felt like he hardly moved at a snail's pace? When he got back to the ledge, Loki was in the same spot. Looking as terrible as when Thor had left. Gingerly lifting the thin (had his brother always been so thin, so *delicate*?) body into his strong arms, he returned to camp.

The Avengers were more alert now, Dr. Banner and Clint both sitting around Stark while Steve and Natasha watched. They all looked up when Thor returned, and Banner gave him a tentative smile.

"Tony seems to be okay," he said. "I can't feel any broken bones, and there aren't any open wounds."

"That's a relief," Thor murmured, gently laying his brother on another of the hand-made mattresses. "Loki won't be able to do anything more for him for at least another full day." Possibly longer. Though his knowledge on the matter was limited, he did know it was dangerous to fully

expend one's stores of seiðr.

As Loki had once explained it, *"Think of having your last drop of blood wrung from your body."*

He'd been smiling at the time.

"How is he?" Natasha asked, concern showing clearly on her face.

Thor brushed damp, ebony hair off his brother's forehead. "I really don't know," he said quietly.

"I'm shamefully ignorant of magic and its effect on the body."

Her slender hand reached over and squeezed his arm. "It's Loki. He survived all six of us in battle, he can survive this."

Thor couldn't help but return her smile. "He is strong." He repeated it to himself. *He is strong. And his condition was much worse when I found him several weeks ago.*

He'll be fine.

oOo

"Tell me your name."

There are a thousand colors in that voice. They are all shades of gray, black, and dark blue. He doesn't hear words. He sees colors. The colors take shape, and that is how he knows what is being asked. The color green flickers through his mind in answer.

I am green. A color associated so strongly with an identity he does not forget, even if his own name is no longer in his head.

Do people normally have names? Or do they just wear colors on their skin and in the air around them?

"What is your name?" is asked again.

The lips don't move. He sees a pale blue swirled with silver at the inquiry.

"Why are you weeping?"

Heat. He can taste the heat on his skin. It is liquid, it is gold. Gold and white. He can hear it track down his cheeks. The heat on his skin is unbearable. The air is so cold he can hear it cracking around him, the dreadful thunder of faces falling off glaciers.

"Come with me. I'll help you."

It tastes like an open grave, those fingers on him. His skin registers no touch. He remembers being able to feel. Now, all he can taste is the grave. Loamy dirt, rotting flesh, decaying bone. It is either bile or his own voice bubbling up in the back of his throat.

I saw the unmaking of the universe. I saw the making of it. I felt the birth of everyone. I felt the pain of the death of everything. I felt the heat of a billion suns being born. I felt the chill of complete emptiness. I felt the wound of every war. I felt the terrible pleasure of every joy. I have been remade.

No, I have been unmade.

I am nothing.

Yet, I have been everything.

"I'll help you."

The one whose touch tastes like death keeps saying that.

But he keeps hearing the color red, and red is pain. Red is blood. Blood that he can't see but can hear leaking from his every vein. Can taste the heat of it on his skin as it streaks down his face. And yet, it is cold. So cold. Still visible in the black air around him.

And he can feel nothing.

He can feel everything.

He is not afraid, yet he cannot stop trembling.

"Listen to me."

Where do the voices go when they stop screaming? He is laughing, but he can't hear it. He can see it, pouring from his lips, orange as poppy blossoms. His mind is railing at the wrongness of that. He laughs harder.

Or maybe he is weeping.

"You're mine."

"You belong to me."

"I will break you, Loki."

Too late. I am already broken. I was unmade. Can't you see the pieces of me? I can't see anything, but I can taste it. I know it's there. And where are the voices when they aren't screaming? Do they die, too? Did they crawl back under my skin where there's always green?

He thinks if he focuses, he will be able to hear the voice instead of see it. Feel the touch instead of taste it. And always with the color red. Isn't blood red? Then, perhaps his world is awash with blood, because it is all he sees. Red. Red. Red.

"Scream. Listen to the sound of your voice, Loki. The pain will be worse if you don't."

He can't remember how to scream.

Loki. Green. Loki. Green.

What is causing this terrible pain? What is making everything red? Where is the red coming from? Why can he only taste death?

And why can't he stop laughing?

oOo

Thor jolted out of a sort of stupor when he heard Loki make a low, terrible sound. It made his gut clench and his heart race, he'd never heard anything more pained or tormented come from his brother. Not even when he'd tracked Loki down those weeks ago did his brother let out such a

dreadful sound. It galvanized him to action before he even thought, clasping Loki's hand.

"Brother?"

Loki's eyes were open mere slits, and they didn't track to Thor at the sound of his voice. His thin chest was heaving, and a touch revealed his heart was racing. Perspiration had beaded on his skin, causing his hair to cling to his face and neck. At Thor's touch, though, he flinched and his lips started moving.

He couldn't make out any words. There wasn't any sound behind them, just those desperate, panting breaths. He squeezed his brother's slim hand. Leaning forward, he tried to catch the words. After a few tries, he heard it.

"I'm Loki. I'm Loki. I'm Loki."

Over and over again. Thor felt his heart would break. A sudden burst of clarity, and he knew without a doubt his brother was dreaming about his time in Yggdrasil. He gripped Loki's shoulder.

"Wake up, brother," he said, low but forceful. "Loki, wake up. You're dreaming. You're just dreaming. I'm right here." He tried to keep his voice quiet enough not to wake his human friends, most of whom had only just fallen asleep.

Loki didn't respond, a shiver starting in his body as if he was suddenly freezing cold. Thor slid an arm under Loki's torso and levered his brother up against his broad chest, wrapping his arms around him. He pressed his cheek to damp black hair.

"Wake up," he whispered, rocking the younger. "I'm right here, little brother. You aren't alone in that terrible place any longer. Wake up." He squeezed so tightly he was sure Loki would protest if he were awake.

Yet his brother didn't respond. He continued to shiver, his skin cold and wet to the touch, his chest still heaving, his heart still racing, his lips still mumbling his own name like a mantra. Trying to memorize it. Trying to remember it. Thor chafed Loki's thin arms, hoping to restore heat to frozen limbs.

"Loki. *Loki*. Wake up. *Wake up*."

oOo

Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. A command in the color blue. Sky blue. Comforting blue. Not a warm color, blue. Yet somehow a comforting color. A color associated strongly with an identity he knows he should remember. Like green.

Also a cold color.

Not a bright splash of heat and rage like red.

Wake up.

Loki. Loki. Wake up. WAKE UP.

oOo

Loki's entire body spasmed in Thor's arms, then he heard a faint sound of definite protest. "You're . . . hurting me, Thor."

Laughing in sheer relief, Thor eased the strength of his hold. He did not relinquish it. "Sorry, little brother," he whispered into lank ebony hair. "You were dreaming of a place you should not wander."

A soft snort, barely audible, a faint buff of air over Thor's collar bone. "And how would you know?"

Smiling at this compliant-yet-argumentative side of his brother, Thor shifted him to get more comfortable. Loki didn't offer even token resistance. "You kept mumbling your own name," he said softly.

For long moments, Loki lay quietly in his arms. "I knew it was a risk, using magic on the elemental," he said at length. "They'll be fine, by the way. The humans. A few days of rest and tonic to regenerate the lost blood and they'll be good as new."

"I'm more worried about you right now," Thor replied honestly.

"I'm fine," came the expected dismissal. "Worst injury I've suffered is you crushing me."

Thor smiled into Loki's hair. "Don't lie to me, little brother." Loki's skin definitely felt warmer, now.

A little too warm, in fact. He frowned, opening his mouth.

"Yes, it's possible," Loki forestalled him.

Thor raised an eyebrow. "What's possible?"

"For me to get a fever."

Thor chuckled, now pressing his cheek to Loki's forehead. "How do you know that's what I was going to ask?"

"You're terribly predictable."

The elder snorted. "Will you be all right?"

"In this form, yes. As long as I don't gad about in my Jötunn form, I'll be fine."

A form, Thor realized somewhat belatedly, he'd never seen. It was an idle thought. He didn't want to think of Loki as Jötunn. If he started down that path, even in his own mind, he feared Loki would somehow believe Thor truly didn't see him as a brother.

Nothing, it seemed, could make Thor feel that way. After all, he and Loki had gone through many ordeals and trials to come back to this point.

"Don't be sentimental, Thor."

The god of thunder grinned. "And how would you know if I'm being sentimental? I haven't spoken."

"I can feel it sloshing around in your head. It's like a Midgardian hamster on a wheel made entirely of syrup."

Thor laughed, low and warm. Even weak and fevered, Loki was still Loki. It was immensely comforting. "Be silent and sleep, brother."

"Mm. It seems I'm too weary to disobey."

His grin softened to a smile. "Rest, little brother, and dream no more of past torment. I'm right here."

"You're a fool, Thor." Soft, barely audible, and strangely tender.

"A tremendous fool," Thor agreed blithely. It took only a bit of shifting to slide his hand up over Loki's mouth. "Stop talking and sleep."

Did those lips curve up into a slight smile? Loki faintly hummed what might have been acquiescence, then his body slowly relaxed and went limp. Thor held him long into the night.

oOo

Tony opened his eyes to find himself staring up at a forest canopy. Well, that was different. He definitely remembered being in a frozen wasteland waking up to gray cave walls. When had they gotten into forest? Then a panic took hold. How could things change so drastically without him being aware? Forgetting an evening's drunken revelry was one thing.

Forgetting something out here away from Earth and his Tower and everything normal, that could mean death.

He sat bolt-upright, heart racing. Well, that was his plan. His body responded how he expected a de-boned fish might: with limp flopping and no strength. He was about to scream when a strong hand gripped his arms and familiar face appeared.

"Easy, Tony."

"Bruce," he gasped, trying to relax. "Never thought I'd be so glad to see your ugly mug."

Bruce gave him a well-familiar crooked smile. "Glad you're feeling like your usual self."

"Not remotely," Tony argued. "What the hell happened? I feel like my bones've been replaced with Jell-O."

"You don't remember? The elemental?"

Memory rushed back. An enormous, vaguely man-shaped creature held together by gold-and-green light. "Ugh. Yeah, it threw a boulder the size of a VW at me and Natasha." New panic. "How's Natasha? She okay?"

"Yeah," Bruce said with a smile. "Wasn't quite as bad off as you. You both lost a lot of blood, but Loki said you'd be all right with a little rest."

"Help me sit up," Tony commanded.

Bruce obeyed, and Tony found himself surveying a cozy camp. The air was warm, and a large fire crackled in the center of eight 'beds' that looked to be made of pine boughs covered in furs. Surprisingly comfortable, really. A spit had been erected over the fire, and it was currently cooking trout. There was a pot of water near it.

The cap, the two assassins, the thunder god, and the Hulk were all accounted for and up and looking alert. Tony's eyes fell on the mage last, simply because Loki was the only one not moving. He stared at the prone form, shocked.

Loki's skin was gray, and dark shadows chased themselves under his closed eyes. Perspiration covered every inch of visible skin, which was everything from the waist up. He looked so thin, and his chest was heaving as if he'd just run a thousand-mile marathon. His black hair clung to his face and neck. Thor was sitting close, bathing his brother's forehead and chest with a somber expression.

The entire scene was profoundly disturbing. Seeing Loki weak was . . .

Unnatural.

"Hey," Tony said when Thor looked at him. "How's he doing?"

"He's unwell," Thor said quietly.

Something to which Tony was not accustomed welled up in his breast. Deep, aching fear. Fear for another. A fear so profound he'd actually only ever felt it with one other person: Pepper.

He'd never in a million years expected to feel it for Loki.

"Why's he like this?" he demanded.

Thor sighed, staring into the fire for a few moments. "The three of you were gravely wounded. Dying, in fact. Healing is different than performing any other magical feat. It requires much more from a mage. Loki completely drained himself trying to save you." He gave Tony, Natasha, and Steve looks.

Guilt piled on top of the fear. "Is there . . . anything we can do?" Tony asked. It felt like a lame offer. If Loki couldn't help himself, what could he, a mere human, do?

Thor smiled slightly. "Don't blame yourself, my friend. Loki knew the risk. And with rest, he will recover. Far quicker than on Midgard; magic is more abundant here."

Tony *ached* to be in Thor's spot, wanting nothing more than to bundle the prone god into his arms and hold him. His mind berated his heart for its foolish desire.

Bruce handed Tony a water skin. "Loki said you guys need to eat and drink plenty. He also gave us this tonic to help you regenerate the lost blood quicker." He handed Tony a glass bottle filled with a pale blue liquid.

Tony didn't question, he just threw it back. It tasted a bit like licorice. Weird. And it made his head tingle. "Whoa. That shit's weird."

Beside him, Natasha snorted. "Tell me about it. I felt like I was wearing a jumpsuit of static electricity."

The Avengers ate in relative silence, and it felt strange to be sitting around in a place that wasn't anywhere on Earth like they were out camping. Tony couldn't stop looking at Loki, wishing the god would open his eyes. At some point he stopped panting and lay still. That was even worse, because now it looked like he was dead.

Eventually he noticed Thor was watching him. For once, he couldn't make himself look away. He gazed at the elder Aesir, wondering what Thor could see in his countenance. Worry? Anxiety? Longing? All of the above? Tony wasn't quite sure himself what he was feeling.

Bullshit, said a soft voice in the back of his mind. *You're worried because you care about him.*

Care about him a whole fucking lot. More than anyone since Pepper.

And seriously, *when had that happened?* Why had it happened?

At some point, Steve and Natasha both fell asleep, which Bruce idly said was good. They needed rest. He gently suggested Tony try to sleep, too, but he couldn't. Food and the tonic had given him a bit of strength, enough that he crawled off the makeshift mattress and over to Loki's side. Bruce, Barton, and Thor said nothing, and Tony didn't see any judgment on their faces.

Good, because he was seriously on edge right now and would definitely say something he would regret later.

Reaching out, he brushed his fingers over Loki's forehead. "He's hot," he murmured. "How could he have a fever?"

"It's not a natural one," Thor said quietly, handing Tony a cool, damp rag. "His body is drained and exhausted."

Tony wiped at the sweat on Loki's brow. "He saved my life." It sounded like an excuse even as it left his lips. An excuse to show this concern.

An excuse to touch.

Hawkeye abruptly stood up. "I could use some help fishing, Dr. Banner."

Tony didn't watch them go, but he felt a bolt of gratitude. "I think I love him," he blurted when they had gone.

Silence. Tony stared down at his own hands, wondering in a panicky kind of shock where the *fuck* that'd come from. The silence was starting to feel like a threat of terrible violence when Thor abruptly chuckled, low and soft.

"I believe Loki would call this a case of hero worship. He saved you. Of course you're feeling emotional right now."

An out. Thor was giving him an out. It was really decent of him. Tony shook his head. "I've felt this way for a while now." Since when? Was he ever going to stop being such a fucking idiot when it came to this man?

A strong, *strong* hand gripped his shoulder and squeezed. "I would say your feelings are unwise," Thor said, "but it would be an absurd understatement." A gentle sigh. "Stark, you realize whatever you're feeling right now is impossible."

Tony didn't need clarification to understand what Thor was saying. Loki was going to live a long, long time. *My life is practically half over.* "Yeah. But I still feel it."

An even tighter squeeze. "The heart wants what it wants. For your sake, I would suggest you convince it to want else."

Snorting, Tony resumed bathing Loki's face and neck. *I really, really wish it were that simple. Believe me, I know better than anyone how stupid this is. I'm falling for someone I think is incapable of anything as vulnerable as love. And I thought I had issues with it.*

"Thank you," Thor said after a time.

Blink. "For what?"

"For loving him," came the simple reply. "There is no way he isn't aware of your feelings. He needs to remember he's worth loving."

Tony stared at him. "Shit, big guy, that was really fucking sappy. I'm gonna pretend you didn't say it so I don't have to come up with a response."

Laughter. "As you will, Stark."

Thirty-Second Installment

Thirty-Second Installment: Never-Ending Threat

"I have a task for you. It should be simple."

"A task."

"Yes. Loki is in Nidavellir. His little human friends are hurt, in no real condition to fight. I would like you to find them. Put them down, and bring Loki to me."

"You make no mention of Thor."

"Thor is with them."

"Is he hurt?"

"No."

"Then I will not do this thing. Thor is strong. I could not challenge him and win. I will not put my life at risk for you or anyone else."

"What if Thor could be drawn off?"

"How would you do that?"

"I could arrange for a distraction. Of a sort."

"Why are you asking me and not going yourself?"

"At this time, I cannot leave Alfheim. I'm still working with the Aether, trying to get it to respond to me."

"You're afraid of Thor. You're afraid of what he could do to you, so you offer me as a sacrificial lamb."

"It is not Thor who troubles me, Surtr. It is Thanos. He has turned on us."

"What?"

"Yes. For the time being, it is safer for me if I remain hidden from sight. He has no reason to target you."

"Will your plan continue to unravel like this, Witch? I thought to align myself with one who achieves success, not constant failure."

"Do not speak to me like that, Surtr. You owe me your very existence."

"Fine. Arrange your distraction. I will put down the Avengers and bring the silvertongue to you."

oOo*oOo

Tony woke up tired, his sleep troubled by dark dreams. Based on ambient light it was sometime past dawn, and he gingerly sat up. Happily, he was significantly stronger than yesterday. Bruce,

who was sitting by the still-going fire, reached over to him and handed him another vial.

"You look a lot better," he commented.

"I feel a lot better," Tony said, tossing the contents back. The slightly tingly sensation visited again. He glanced around to see both Steve and Natasha still asleep, Thor and Clint nowhere in sight, and Loki looking no better than yesterday.

"Thor and Hawkeye are scouting the nearby area," Bruce said after a moment. He was right by Loki, obviously keeping watch over him. "I guess Loki warned Thor we were pretty visible out here."

Tony suddenly wished he and Loki were alone. Somewhere safer, certainly, but alone. "How's he doing?"

Bruce looked down at Loki, then after a moment he sighed. "I wish I knew. I have no idea what's normal or what's a sign of his vitals failing. He hasn't moved and he still has a fever. But he's breathing and his heart's beating. Those have to be good signs."

For a time, Tony gazed at the downed god in silence. *I sure can't figure him out. Acts so damn superior to humans and treats us like we're pretty much just an inconvenience—or tools in his private war. Whatever. And then he goes and risks himself to save our lives.*

Do you love me or hate me, Loki?

"You really care about him, don't you?"

Tony jumped at the sound of Natasha's voice. He turned his head to find the woman watching him, but there was no judgment in her eyes. Something more like understanding filled them. Definitely not wanting to have a conversation about this so soon after spilling his guts to Thor, Tony shrugged.

"He's part of our team, right?"

"It's more than that," she pressed. "You look like a man who knows his feelings are way beyond stupid but can't help himself."

Tony bit the inside of his cheek. "Fine. Yeah. I care about him. What of it?" Slightly hostile.

"Nothing of it," she replied. "Stranger things have happened."

"Oh yeah?" Tony said, amused in spite of himself. "Name one."

"My working for SHIELD."

Tony chuckled. "*Me* working for SHIELD," he added.

"Right. See? Your falling for a sociopathic god from another realm is nothing." Her voice was teasing.

He shook his head. *I'm carrying a torch for a former enemy, and my current friends who all fought him are supportive. I have the strangest fucking life.*

"What I wouldn't give for a shower," Natasha abruptly changed the subject, slowly rising from the pine mattress. "I feel gross."

The image of a naked and dripping wet Loki in his shower rose in Tony's mind. *Damn it.*

"We're pretty close to a river," Bruce said, pointing east. "It'd be cold, but you could wash up."

She leaned over and shook Steve awake. "C'mon. We could both use a little moving around."

Tony leaned toward Bruce. "If you love me at all, go with them."

Bruce chuckled a little. "Don't think they want a third wheel."

"Then go gather some roots and berries."

"Really? Roots and berries?"

"Hey, we're in a forest."

Still chuckling, Bruce stood up. "I'll give you twenty minutes."

"You're a saint."

In short order, Tony had the camp all to himself and Loki. Shuffling off the mattress, he climbed onto Loki's with him. Since the god was unconscious, he didn't have to work much to slide his arms under Loki's shoulders and lever him up against his chest. He tucked Loki's head under his chin, grimacing a little at the heat pouring off his skin.

"Hey, princess," he murmured, pressing his lips to damp ebony hair. "Wake up for me, huh? Show me those pretty green eyes."

It took a bit of encouragement, but presently Loki stirred. He made a faint sound. "Hot. Stark . . . you're hot."

"Why thank you. Took you long enough to notice."

A soft, short laugh. "You're making *me* hot."

Tony realized Loki wasn't trying to push him off or get away. He was just quietly lying in Tony's arms. It was almost a startling revelation, even more so when Tony realized he could simply hold Loki without wanting anything more. Wasn't that a hallmark of love and not lust? How terrifying. He really didn't know if he could handle being in love with Loki.

He was equally unsure if he could even stop it, at this point.

"A reminder was due," he said after a moment.

"Reminder . . . ?" Loki's voice was faint.

"Yeah. We have a bargain. Remember?"

"Bargain . . . idiotic though it was . . ."

He sounded barely conscious. It was cute. "You'll just have to accept that I love kissing you. And don't forget, you promised you'd kiss me all *I* want."

"Mm. Did I?"

"Yes."

"Must have been delirious," Loki murmured, lips tickling Tony's collar bone. "I don't remember."

"Like hell you were," Tony argued, tilting his head to press his lips to Loki's forehead. His skin was *so* hot. "You even called me by my first name. For the first time, I might add."

"Clearly *you* were delirious."

There was a hint of teasing in Loki's voice. Still himself, even though he was obviously miserable. *Shit*, Tony thought. *I've got it. Bad.* "So all that stuff about how you never break a bargain was just bullshit?"

Loki made a sound that *might* have been laughter. It tapered off quickly, and the slender god shifted. "Put me down, Stark. Hot . . ."

He tossed his head against Tony's neck, and Tony had to force himself to lower Loki to the mattress. That seemed to calm him a little, but his verdant eyes didn't reopen and his breathing seemed a bit labored. Or was that just Tony, freaking out because the god he *might* have feelings for was so obviously sick?

Thor appeared out of nowhere. Seriously. He was just suddenly there. He levered Loki more-or-less upright, holding a waterskin to his lips. "Drink, brother," he murmured.

Loki made an unhappy sound and jerked away, panting and chest beginning to heave. Thor grimaced.

"You need it, Loki," he whispered, holding Loki's head back. "Drink. It will help you sleep."

Now Loki let out a growl. "Don't . . . need *sleep*," he ground out through a clenched jaw. "Can't get it . . . *out!*"

Tony blinked, startled. "What the hell does he mean by that?"

Thor shook his head, not relenting with the waterskin. He managed to get the opening between Loki's teeth, and then it was either swallow or drown. Loki opted for swallow, but he coughed and choked. Tony had the utterly ridiculous and absurd desire to punch Thor in the face for hurting Loki . . . even if it was to help him.

This infatuation is getting unhealthy.

Once Thor took the waterskin away, Loki seemed to drift back toward unconsciousness. After a few seconds, his eyes fluttered open and he grabbed Thor's arm.

"Don't . . . lower . . . she won't . . . I can *hear* it," he murmured. "Thor . . . the witch . . ."

Thor leaned down and pressed his lips to Loki's forehead. "I won't lower my guard," he promised softly. "I'll watch over everyone. You just rest."

That seemed to be all Loki needed to relax, but he didn't remove his hand from Thor's arm. His eyes, dull though they were, remained locked with Thor's. "Didn't mean . . ." he mumbled. "Thor . . . my brother . . ."

Tony had never seen a smile like that on Thor's face.

"I know," the god of thunder whispered. "Now go to sleep."

It happened in the middle of the night. Loki knew it would. He'd seen it in the nightmares still plaguing him from touching Yggdrasil. Three fire giants. Large beings that looked quite similar to their cousins the frost giants, except their skin was red-orange instead of blue. Their eyes were large smoldering, coal-black pits, and their skin was covered in ragged markings that looked like open wounds but were actually clan markings.

Loki's first thought was incredibly inane: *I'm glad they don't have their Casket anymore. This fight would be a lot more one-sided.*

His second thought was more relevant: *The captain, Natasha, and Stark aren't in any fighting condition.*

His third thought had nothing to do with anything: *I hope the elemental is okay.*

Body jerking in alarm that he was actually drifting off to sleep in the middle of a fight, Loki struggled to roll onto his side and sit up. He only managed to prop himself up on his elbows. His seiðr had finally begun to regenerate, but he was nowhere near able to fight himself, and the fever had left him unexpectedly weak.

Healing someone else was more work than he'd remembered. Healing himself was actually pretty simple, since he didn't have to expend any seiðr. The energy didn't have to leave him.

The fire giants didn't catch the Avengers off guard, quite. Hawkeye was keeping watch, and fire giants didn't have much in the way of camouflage. They were carrying long spears, and Loki knew they would be enchanted with fire. He winced when one of them threw its spear at Hawkeye. The archer, thank Odin for his superlative vision, saw it coming and rolled safely out of the way.

Thor met them head on, naturally unafraid. Mjölfnir all but sung in his hands, and Loki winced at the crack of thunder. However, the fire giants' sheer size worked against him. Then Banner joined the fight. Loki wanted to warn him not to let them touch his bare skin, but he was already grappling one with a roar and seemed to be okay.

It took Loki less than ten seconds to realize what the fire giants were doing. They were a distraction. A big and dangerous one, but a distraction all the same. Stark was next to useless without his suit, it was too damaged for use. The captain would be able to defend himself with his shield, but even that wouldn't be able to save him forever.

Grimacing, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Much, *much* faster than before he felt a welling up of terrible, natural, unnatural energy. Yggdrasil knew him now. It was all too eager to welcome him back. Gold filled his mind, tumultuous and beautiful and hideous at the same time. In the blink of an eye he'd transformed himself into a crow.

His hunch turned out to be correct. While the three healthy Avengers battled the visible threat, a fourth fire giant slipped out of the shadows with a great, quadruple-bladed war axe. Loki didn't think the captain, Stark, or Natasha even saw it. The fire giant raised the axe and swung it down with tremendous strength. It would easily cleave all three humans in half with one blow.

All three of them vanished in a frenzy of black feathers, a swarm of crows scattering into the shadows of the forest.

The fire giant let loose a foul oath.

Which drew Thor's attention. He turned, and a single mighty leap took him to the fourth fire giant. Mjölfnir blazed with blue-white light, and the war axe shattered with an aching clear, high note.

It was over surprisingly quickly. When the ill-fated battle turned in the Avengers' favor, the fire giants activated their own version of a transport medallion and disappeared. Loki flew to the ground near the fire and retook his Aesir form. On the other side of the camp, Rogers, Stark, and Natasha all reappeared. They looked plenty surprised.

Thor went to Loki's side, and he looked up at Barton to see the man sporting a deep gash across his arm. He shook his head, gazing up at Thor.

"I can't keep doing this," he panted. "They'll all be dead long before we reach the witch if I have to keep healing them. There's only one of me."

Strong hands gripped his shoulders. "I know," Thor murmured. "How can I help?"

"You can't," Loki replied, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. He was slipping dangerously close to insanity, and he could only imagine how he would pay for using that forbidden energy.

Energy which, according to all texts, couldn't even be channeled by a single mage without some sort of focusing agent.

It was almost enough to make him smirk.

"You *can*, however, bring me something that would aid me," he told his brother, looking back up. "With it, I could give these four—" he gestured to encompass Hawkeye, Natasha, Stark, and the captain—"significant restorative abilities. They would quickly heal minor and moderate injuries, and it would mitigate the amount of energy I have to expend healing major ones."

He could tell all of them liked the idea, and Thor nodded. "What would you need?"

"The Tesseract."

Thirty-Third Installment

What could Loki be up to?

Thirty-Third Installment: Pendulum

Only one thing had the power to make Loki feel fear anymore, and it flared with a vengeance when Hel spoke and he couldn't hear the words. All he saw was color. *Too much. I've done too much in the last two days.* It took all his mental power to focus on the words, to understand what she was saying and not just dissolve into a laughing, mindless mess.

"I haven't spoken to you in quite some time, Silvertongue."

The most interesting combination of colors rolled off her lips at that. Silver. Green. Black. Orange. Made living things in the air. Wasn't this his dreamscape? Wasn't he supposed to be able to control the changes?

No. Stop.

"I'm glad you came," he said. At least, he thought he said it. He hoped he did. Maybe his mouth only bled color, and maybe Hel was just a vivid dream giving him a strange look because his skin was blue now instead of pale.

No, not blue.

Green.

Green. Loki.

Stop.

"You have something for me?" Hel asked.

It gave him something to focus on. *Have something for you. Yes.* "Not actually," he replied. "But I have information you'll be able to put to good use."

"Indeed?" Curiosity, bright yellow.

"You told me once you couldn't claim the Casket of Ancient Winters as long as the Tesseract was in Asgard." It was part of their bargain. Either Loki gave Hel the four Caskets, or he gave her information that directly led to her acquiring them herself. "As of tomorrow morning, it will no longer be in Asgard."

She blinked. Loki almost shuddered. He could taste the sound of her eyelashes brushing her cheeks. His skin crawled. Crawled red.

He could taste red.

No.

"How did you arrange that?" she asked.

Loki turned away and closed his eyes, not wanting to see words any longer. "More easily than you

would think," he replied.

At least, he thought he did.

He hoped he did, because when he opened his eyes again she was gone.

Loki. Small. Tiny. But not insignificant. Tiny, but not insignificant. Never that. Never insignificant. Loki. Green.

Loki.

You were the first.

The first.

So tiny. Lost within. Lost within gold. Losing yourself in gold. Loki. Gold.

Impressions. Voices. Voices that never stopped. Voices that had nothing to say and yet said everything that ever was, voices that didn't exist and yet *never stopped*.

Loki clapped his hands over his ears and sank to his knees. "Stop," he ground out between clenched teeth.

Colors. Colors of red, blue, green, white, and clashing violet. Colors that at their base, that at their foundation, were gold. Always gold.

The color of life. The color of light. The color of everything.

Of nothing.

And through time forward and backward as far as he could feel, the voices. The voices clawed at his senses, red. Red. Red. He could smell red. It smelled like blood. It smelled like earth. It smelled like copper, like decay, like sweet spring flowers, like fresh water, like the grave, like fire.

It tasted like death.

You were the first. You saw all that flows in my veins of gold. So tiny. Too tiny to hold it all within. But not insignificant. Not you. Not green. Not Loki. Loki, loki lokiloki loki.

"Stop," he hissed.

Voices singing a song only he could feel, spewing colors he could hear, singing words he could taste.

"I told you this would be easy."

You're lying. I'm drowning. What part of this is easy?

What part of this is easy?

oOo

The Avengers were shocked out of their various states of waking or unwaking by a terrible cry.

Thor had already left for Asgard, so Bruce had been taken over the job of watch. Tony floundered out of sleep and fell off the mattress, already opening his mouth for Jarvis before he remembered

where he was. His eyes flew around to find Banner kneeling over Loki, who was hunched over away from the fire.

He moved without thought.

Loki's head snapped up. His eyes were dark. "Get *away* from me!" he snarled.

Taken aback, Tony recoiled a step. "What the hell, Loki?" he muttered.

Just as quickly as hurt started to flare, it vanished when Loki's arms tightened around himself and he bowed forward with a sound somewhere between a cry of pain and a moan. "All of you!" he panted. "Get away!"

Tony's eyes widened as he realized what he was seeing. Loki was . . . bleeding gold. Just like that day in the Tower where his magic had run out of control. Only, then it had been green. This was gold. And somehow, it looked unnatural.

"I think this is like then," Bruce said quietly, his hands on Loki's shoulders.

"Bet Jarvis would say the energy is different, though," Tony said just as quietly. "Can you help contain this? Whatever it is?"

"No," Loki groaned, shaking his head, eyes squeezed shut. "This is . . . *not* the same! Just leave. Get as far away as you can!"

"Are you sure?" Bruce asked, and Tony was surprised by how tender his voice sounded.

Loki's whole body was trembling. "Yes, I'm *sure*. This isn't my seiðr. It can . . . kill even you, Banner."

The other Avengers had gathered around, and Steve grabbed Tony's arm to pull him up. "C'mon. This is one area we have no choice but to trust him."

Leaving Loki while he was obviously suffering felt like the worst kind of crime imaginable. "Isn't there anything we can do?" he asked, just in case Loki had a brilliant idea.

"Yes," Loki snapped. "Leave."

Liquid gold light was pooling beneath Loki. Unlike the green, this wasn't seeming to cause any damage to anything it touched, but it was magic. Tony wasn't about to bet his life on that stuff being harmless. And Steve was tugging on his arm, drawing him away. Tony had to force himself to go, and Banner followed.

After two days, Loki's tonic had seemed to work magic of its own on the three formerly injured humans. Though Tony wasn't quite back to full strength, there was no way in hell he'd be doing this well on Earth. He knew this had thawed all the Avengers toward Loki, and it was apparent in the concern on their faces when they moved away from him. They didn't stop, either, until even the light of the campfire was no longer visible.

Then silence. Dead silence. Not so much as insect noise.

"I hate this," Natasha said after what felt like a long while. "I want to help him."

"You and me both," Tony immediately added, weirdly grateful to hear someone echo what he was already thinking.

"I'm pretty sure we all do," Steve said after only a few seconds.

The heavy silence resumed. Tony wondered if they were all imagining the worst, like he was. He tried to distract himself. *How does a person go from enemy to ally to friend to . . . whatever Loki and I are? Seriously, I'm pretty sure that equation just breaks math.* He tried to formulate ideas on how Loki would use the Tesseract to give the Avengers regenerative abilities. Would it be tingly? Hot? Painful? He shuddered. He didn't like pain.

Not since . . . back then.

He idly rubbed his chest over the arc reactor.

I'm changed. Loki changed me. It was a strange revelation. Pepper had managed that remarkable feat, too. With her, Tony had wanted to be the best person he could. She was wonderful and *good*, and it made him want to be good, too. It was different with Loki. Loki was dark and dangerous and *not* good. Not evil but not good. He was somewhere in a category all to himself. And Tony didn't want to deviate, didn't want to disappoint, didn't want Loki to throw him away.

But I still don't really know what he wants from me. A lover would want me to be faithful. Would Loki get mad if I started sleeping around again? Would he even care? Does he consider me his fuck-buddy? Does he even think about me when we're not having sex? Bet he isn't all confused and mixed up over this mess. Bastard.

Tony hadn't wanted Pepper to *want* him. She had loved him, and that was all he needed. But Loki was black to her white, complicated to her beautifully simple. With Loki it was messy, tangled, chaotic. No clearly drawn lines, no clearly defined expectations, no rules. Loki seemed to want nothing at all from him, other than a pliable body if he got feeling frisky.

Tony wasn't used to that. He was used to being the one to give the call for sex, not be the one waiting anxiously for the call. A role reversal he didn't like. Didn't like one bit. Even so, he had yet to tell Loki to fuck off and go find some other willing human to play with. *And why don't I?*

Because what if he did? came the immediate answer. He wanted Loki to care if Tony told him to fuck off.

He was afraid the god wouldn't care.

And that would break Tony's heart. He just knew that. Or at the very least, severely damage his ego. *Do I have enough of a heart left to get broken over something like that?*

The answer came all too readily.

Yes.

oOo

It hurt. It hurt in a new way. There was pressure inside his head that made him feel like his ears and nose were bleeding. Oh, wait. They were. There were many more voices that were all speaking, but he couldn't hear them. He could still see them spewing colors all over the ground like a sort of prismatic vomit. Swirling in a nauseating disarray, and he could taste it in the back of his throat like bile.

Like death.

Like gold.

Hurry up, Thor.

Blue. Blue, blue. Where is blue? How do you define blue? Why do you associate blue with this person? He holds a strange power over you. Strange. Like a Warhammer he cracks down on your heart. He is small. Tiny. But not insignificant. Not to you.

I think I'm dying.

Loki tried to breathe, but every time he inhaled he could smell red. And red smelled like then. It. That terrible time. That terrible place with the darkness he could taste. The stench of death, the feel of red, the smell of every awful, frozen touch.

"Pay attention, Loki."

Don't pay attention. Drown. Drown in gold. Become gold.

I think I'm dying.

How can pain taste like red? How can pain taste like blood? Oh. I'm vomiting blood. That's why I can taste blood.

"Pay attention, Loki."

Green. Loki. Green. Loki.

Loki's eyes snapped open with a ragged cry, but he couldn't hear it. He could taste it, though. It tasted like blood. He squeezed his eyes shut. No. No, he would not let this happen again. He wouldn't lose himself to this madness. He could last until Thor arrived with the Tesseract. Then he would use its power to regenerate his own seiðr. Then he would drive this golden energy from his body.

This energy that came straight from Yggdrasil.

This energy, that was causing him to flare like an enormous beacon. Everyone with any ability in the Nine would be able to sense this. Some would even know *what* they were sensing.

Hurry up, Thor.

Blue. You take comfort in blue. Take comfort in gold instead. You were the first. You could belong to me. You're already halfway there.

No.

A step. A plunge. Total immersion. You would barely know the difference. Come. Just a little closer. So small. So intriguing. Come closer.

No.

The voices were so silent and felt so terrible, burning over his skin, strafing his mind, blacking his vision and turning his body to lead. Their lips spewed a promise of utter madness. Madness the colors of gold and red.

And pain. Pain he could taste. Pain that tasted like red and smelled like gold, or was it the other way around? His senses had almost completely abandoned him, because they were too mixed up to even know the difference between taste, sound, color, and sensation.

You're not dying. You're drowning.

"Pay attention, Loki."

Loki. Green. Loki.

"Loki."

Green.

Loki's entire body jolted when he realized he could feel someone calling his name. He could feel the heavy fear and anxiety in the voice. It felt hot. Too hot for his oversensitive skin. Why did it feel like he was weeping? Like he was bleeding from every pore?

Oh. He was.

Gold.

"LOKI!"

Eyes wrenching open, Loki managed to lift his head. Thor's blue eyes were filled with horror, and the taste on the back of Loki's tongue changed to blue.

"Thor . . ."

He couldn't hear his voice. He could only taste blue.

Tesseract blue. The cube flared brilliantly in its magical prison, reacting strongly to the magic bleeding from Loki's body. A helpless vessel to Yggdrasil.

"Is it safe to touch you, brother?" Thor asked, his face looking strange, blanched of all color.

Is it because I can no longer see color?

But he could still see gold.

A shudder ran over the entire surface of his skin. *Pay attention. He asked me a question. Safe. Touch. Is it safe to touch me? I don't know. It's probably not even safe to be me, right now.*

"Yes," he croaked.

Thor immediately waded into gold, and Loki was once more caught up in morbid curiosity. Blue swirled strongly into gold. It smelled like summer. Sun and sky. Sky and sun. Loki winced when Thor's hand connected with his skin, because it sounded like thunder. A summer storm.

Trembling, Loki straightened and managed to grasp the Tesseract's container. Liquid gold spilled down onto it, and Loki twisted until the top came free. He instantly plunged his hand inside to grasp the naked cube.

Oh, it hurt. So focused up was he on not losing his mind, he hadn't thought to consider this part. It took his breath away, leaving him feeling shell-shocked and breathless. Angry sparks of blue and white clashed behind his eyes, crackling explosions over his skin. He couldn't help it and opened his mouth to scream.

Thor caught Loki when his brother toppled sideways, letting out a heartbreaking cry. His whole body began to writhe and jerk, and Thor wrapped himself around Loki's thin frame to help brace him. Whatever his brother was doing seemed to be working, that unnatural gold light was fading from Loki's skin. It was also disappearing from the ground around him. Though Thor knew little of magic, he did know that energy came from Yggdrasil.

It had no place in Loki's body. That much raw power could destroy even an Aesir in a few heartbeats.

That Loki was still alive frankly stunned Thor. Truly, it was impossible. It also made him yet again consider what Loki must have suffered while he was the Mad Titan's prisoner. *It's amazing he's not completely insane. A lesser man would have been.*

Presently, the wild trembling seemed to ease. After another several long moments, it tapered off altogether. The glow around Loki's body gradually went from blue-white to green. Thor released a breath he didn't remember holding. Green was the color of his brother's seiðr. Green was good. Green was natural.

The glow intensified until it seemed to be shining out from Loki's pores. His brother didn't move, remaining still in Thor's arms, breathing slow and even. There he stayed, until the very last tremor vanished from his frame. When he opened his eyes, they were clear and bright.

"Thank you," he murmured, meeting Thor's gaze.

There was no sardonic edge, no hint of mockery, no bite of derision. Only pure relief and gratitude.

Thor smiled, hoping the tenderness he felt and couldn't hide wouldn't drive Loki into his shell again. "There seems to be little I won't do for you."

To his surprise, Loki smiled. It was a sweet, mischievous expression he'd not seen in far, far too long. "Ever the sentimental fool, my brother. And yet, just this once, I find myself glad of it."

It was such a *huge* concession. Thor resisted the impulse to lean down and kiss his brother's forehead. Though he didn't want to, he unraveled his hold to help Loki sit up. "Do you feel well again?"

Loki slowly returned the Tesseract to its container. "I feel better," he replied. He looked around, and Thor couldn't quite define his brother's expression. "I don't know how to describe to you what it's like being connected to Yggdrasil, Thor. It's . . . terrible."

Thor captured his hand and squeezed. "Try."

This time, Loki wouldn't look at him. "Everything is . . . different. I can't hear sounds, I see them. I can't see colors, I smell them. I can't feel sensations, I hear them. It's disorienting. It's like watching your own sanity drain away and knowing it, but being utterly unable to stop it from happening. It's also painful. The pressure pushes out from inside your skin, because a body is too small to contain it."

His way with words made everything so vivid, so painfully vivid. Thor wanted to embrace him again. "Is it like that?" he asked. "Now?"

For several moments, silence. Then, "Yes." A pause. "It will pass."

Thor opened his mouth to speak.

Loki forestalled him with a wave of his hand. The gesture looked short and irritated. "Enough of this. I have humans to tend."

Thor closed his mouth without a word and sighed. *He's still Loki.* Somehow, that was comforting.

As if not even Yggdrasil had the power to destroy him.

Thirty-Fourth Installment

Thirty-Fourth Installment: Repercussions

As soon as Loki appeared with Thor in tow, Natasha knew something was wrong with the god of mischief. He normally walked with a slight tilt to his chin, shoulders square and straight. It actually made him look taller than he was. It also gave him an arrogant edge, always wearing a hint of a superior smirk. One that said, *I know everything, and you're an idiot.*

When she looked at him now, his shoulders were ever-so-slightly slumped, and his chin was angled a little down. It made him look smaller, thinner, and more vulnerable than she had ever seen him look. Even that day when Thor brought him to Stark Tower all those weeks ago, he'd still had that air of superiority. Even while so badly injured, he'd still worn that knowing smirk.

It was gone. Loki looked completely and utterly exhausted, but there was something else in his eyes. Something . . . buried deep. He looked haunted. His countenance was vaguely shadowed. He was walking without help and appeared fine at first glance.

But she was trained to notice things. Something was wrong. Off.

"Loki," Steve said, and he sounded genuinely relieved. "Are you all right? Did the Tesseract help you?"

Loki seemed to gaze right through the captain. "I'm fine." A short pause. "What I have in mind will likely have long-lasting ramifications. It's entirely possible imbuing your bodies with regenerative magic might actually lengthen your lifespans. Regenerative magic won't just heal injury or illness. It will heal cell degradation caused by aging."

"You're saying we could live forever?" Stark piped up at once.

He looked oddly hopeful.

"No," Loki replied without the usual snap. He just sounded tired. "Not forever." He reached up and brushed a hand over his eyes, then stared at it for a few seconds with something like dull horror. "And you will all react differently to it." He dropped his hand. "Knowing that, I will understand if you decline."

Unsurprising to her, Stark hopped up. "I'm down. I have no problems with that."

Something passed between him and Loki. Natasha couldn't quite define what. Then the god looked to her and Clint. "And you?"

The two assassins shared a look. It was certainly unexpected, but it also made sense. She shrugged. "The longer we live, the longer we can protect Earth. And I don't think Thanos is a problem that will easily go away."

Loki nodded. "I can likely reverse the effects of the Tesseract. None of you possess seiðr, so it's not as though I'm giving you magic."

Somehow, that was a comforting thought. Natasha nodded, and Clint did too.

"Very well," Loki said, sitting down without further preamble. "I can do this for all of you at once, so please sit. It will take a little time. Thor, Captain, Dr. Banner? If you would please keep watch."

The exchange was so weirdly polite. Natasha felt strange as she sat between Stark and Clint. Loki didn't do polite. He issued commands and expected others to obey. *What happened to you, Loki? You might say you're fine, even act like it. But you're not. I can tell.*

oOo

Steve watched Loki work. It was *very* strange, watching him use the Tesseract and having no complaints about it. His automatic response to that thing was, *Danger!* In his experience, it had only ever been used as a weapon. To know Loki was using it for healing . . . well, that was an interesting novelty.

The Aesir had settled cross-legged, the Tesseract floating between his palms. Green light streamed from Loki's hands into the cube, and it was giving off a blue-white glow. Three beams of blue-white energy were flowing into Natasha, Hawkeye, and Stark. The four of them all had their eyes closed, seeming to be in some sort of trance.

Their postures spoke of no pain, no discomfort.

Wait, scratch that. The three humans appeared to be in no pain.

Loki . . . there was something strained about his appearance. Could be the way his shoulders were *barely* hunched forward. Could be the tiny, barely visible lines around his eyes and mouth. And were his hands shaking a little?

Steve found himself grimacing in sincere concern. *He needs rest now more than any of us. He's only one person. Powerful and long-lived, but he's not invincible.* And no matter how strange it still seemed, he was an Avenger. Which meant, Loki's personal feelings aside, he was Steve's responsibility as the leader.

It seems a little backward that we're here, doing this for him, yet he's the one suffering the most. He folded his arms and looked over at Thor. Confirming his suspicions that Loki wasn't okay, Thor was watching his younger brother with naked worry.

This probably has something to do with magic, so I don't understand everything, Steve thought, shifting, *but I don't need to know everything to know Loki is unwell. He said there are dwarves here, and I don't think they're enemies. Hopefully we can find a safe place for him to rest.* And for himself to do a little recon.

And Thor had mentioned the dwarves would most likely be able to repair Tony's suit. Hopefully, there would be no tight quarters in which they had to fight again, because it had rendered Stark pretty much useless.

Himself, too, he added a touch ruefully.

None of the Avengers not involved in the exchange seemed to want to break the silence, so the three of them watched for probably a good twenty minutes without a word. Presently, the blue-white light winked out, and Loki wasted no time putting the Tesseract back into its container. The golden lid flared a little when the Aesir sealed it.

Without looking at Thor, Loki held it toward the elder. "That will take about twenty-four hours to fully work through your systems," he said, and he sounded *strange*. "Maybe a little longer. You won't really feel different, but any aches and pains you've experienced due to age or old injuries will completely fade."

"Loki—?" Thor began.

"I'm fine," Loki said, a clear warning in his tone. "We should get moving." He rose to his feet.

His face was blanched of any and all color. He looked unhealthy. Thor reached out as if to stabilize him with a hand. That earned him a dark glare. A glare full of the promise of murder, different from the usual resistance due to pride. Steve wasn't even sure he could define what he saw on Loki's face.

"Where are we headed?" he asked, almost desperate to feel like something—*anything*—was normal right now.

"We're less than a dozen leagues from a dwarven city," Loki replied, pointing toward the north. "They will give us shelter, and they'll be glad of the challenge to repair Stark's suit."

"Are there any monsters in the forest we should watch for?" Steve asked, even though they'd been here three days without incident.

Loki let out a short, sharp laugh. He cut it off with something like a grimace. Almost as if . . . almost as if he couldn't help it and hated it.

"None in the forest," he said, his tone even less friendly than a few moments ago. "In the mountains, yes. We will venture nowhere near there."

"And what about the witch?" Clint added. "She knows where we are now."

Fire and fury rose up in Loki's eyes. "Must I do *everything*? You are—" He cut himself off with an audible click of teeth. Turning away, eyes closing, he looked as if he was fighting some internal battle.

And losing.

"Thor," he spat, "you know where the city is. Lead them there. I won't be far behind."

With that, a flash of green light transformed him into a crow and he vanished into the trees. Thor ran several steps before he stopped, the worry morphed into something stronger. Steve watched, knowing for sure now that something was wrong.

"What's wrong with him?" Natasha asked quietly.

Thor faced them, clearly troubled. "He has pushed himself too much these last days." Shaking his head, the golden-haired Aesir scrubbed a hand over his face. "More than that I cannot say."

Whatever it was he didn't say, he was afraid for his brother. And that scared Steve more than anything they'd yet faced.

oOo

Loki flew blind for probably a good half hour before he retook his Aesir form and collapsed onto the ground. Shaking, laughing, perspiration making his hair cling to his neck, his fingers dug into the dirt and rock until they bled. It was different this time, because he knew what was happening to him.

When he fell off the rainbow bridge, he'd had no idea.

Now he did, and that was worse. This was a slow descent into madness. An unraveling of Self that left him terrified. And Loki did not like being afraid. He was capable of anything, clever enough to

outthink any foe, to escape any bind, to dance around events and manipulate them to his liking. He'd even taken five humans who, at one time, considered him their worst enemy and made them allies.

They were risking their lives for him.

Loki laughed until he tasted red.

His body shook until he ached.

Stop.

Don't do this again. If you fall this time, you will never claw your way out again.

The voices shrieked their disapproval. Fall, fall. Fall into madness. Fall into gold. Fall into chaos. Never climb out. Never need anything again. Be lost forever. It's all right to drown.

Stop. Covering his face with both hands, Loki sucked in deep, desperate breaths. Trying to drown out the voices. Trying to stop seeing the colors. Trying to remember he was Loki, not *Green*, that he was a person and not just a tiny point of light in a sea of overwhelming gold.

Being able to sense and actually *touch* Yggdrasil when he wasn't there was terrifying. It made his entire body feel like ice, his heart like lead. He wasn't good at being afraid. It gained him nothing to alienate the Avengers, yet he couldn't help lashing out at them.

Couldn't control the impulse.

I will not lose my mind. The thought made him laugh again. He managed to choke it off in the back of his throat. *I need something else to focus on. Something tangible. Pain. Pain would do it.*

After all, Thanos' tortures had somehow helped Loki back to himself.

I could let the witch capture me again. She would undoubtedly torture me to make me the Aether obey her. The shaking in his body began to ease a little. *I escaped her twice before. I'm sure by now Thanos has distanced himself from her, so I'd have only her to contend with. Surtr is a fool and no threat to me, even with the witch at his side.*

Even though his own seiðr flowed through his veins now and not the energy of Yggdrasil, he still felt raw on the inside from the misuse. A single mage's body was not meant to have such terrible power flowing through it.

But you did it. You did it. You were the first.

Aware. It was aware. It wasn't even a conscious entity, yet it was aware. Loki felt the tremor start again, under his skin, clawing through his mind, demanding his attention, commanding it. It wanted. It *wanted*. It wasn't satisfied with a touch, a ripple over the surface, *it wanted*.

How could it want?

The voices howled in red.

And Loki tasted it.

The red that tasted like blood. Like bile. Like death.

Was he bleeding? Vomiting? Dying?

Stop.

Aware he was laughing (or was he screaming?), Loki didn't give it anymore thought as he once more transformed himself to a crow. In a flurry of black feathers he beat for the sky, the taste of his heart beating coating the back of his tongue.

At least as a crow, he couldn't laugh anymore.

Thirty-Fifth Installment

Did you guess what I had in mind? ;)

Thirty-Fifth Installment: Anchor Me

Lord of the Rings, Tony thought with a bemused half-smile, was half right about dwarves. They had a lot of facial hair and were broad-chested. However, they weren't short. The three furry-faced dwarves that greeted them were all a head taller than Steve. They looked distinctly different from the Aesir in two important ways.

First, their skin was muddy brown. Second, instead of eyebrows they had thick ridges of bone protruding from their foreheads. It gave them a weirdly reptilian look. Each carried an enormous double-bladed axe of some white metal with a high shine. The one in the center, dressed all in tan except for a gold sash around his middle, completely ignored the Avengers and gave Thor a brown-eyed glare.

"What do you want here, Odinson?" he demanded in a gravelly voice.

Thor was only a tiny bit shorter than the dwarves. "My brother, Loki—"

"Loki?" the dwarf cut him off. "We will speak with Loki." His beady eyes studied Thor, full of mistrust. "Not you."

"He is following behind us," Thor said.

Tony had the ridiculous thought, *I hope he is*.

"We have something he thought you'd be able to help us with," Thor went on. "A suit of armor."

"Armor?" the dwarf scoffed. "Loki would never insult us by bringing us a suit of *armor*."

"It's not exactly normal armor," Tony said. This guy was getting on his nerves. "I guarantee you've never seen anything like it."

The dwarf only just seemed to notice the five others. He sniffed. "I doubt that, little human." But avarice bloomed in his eyes. He whirled, making his beard flutter. "You may enter. But until Loki has arrived, you will all wait in the courtyard. Let us see this amazing armor of yours, Odinson."

Tony opened his mouth to correct him, but Thor gave him a sideways smile that told him it would be a waste of breath. Shaking his head, he fell in behind the tall Aesir and followed the dwarves into the city.

It was a rugged place, carved right out of rock and stone. It wasn't a gleaming, architectural marvel like Asgard, but it looked very sturdy. Strange beasts that looked like a cross between an ox and a mole trudged the streets, pulling carts of everything from food to fabric to metals. And dwarves ranged everywhere.

The strangest dichotomy came when he spotted females. Though they were tall and broad like the males, the females had skin the color of summer sand. Their eyes were almost disproportionately large, giving them oddly winsome faces. And every single one of them had impressively large bosoms. Tony looked around appreciatively, but he was a little surprised to find he didn't have the

usual impulse to flirt or fuck.

They just weren't Loki.

His armor was stashed in Loki's Astral pocket, so the dwarves led the Avengers to a great big building that smelled of dirt and ash. Tony suspected it was a castle of leaders, and they told them to wait in a hall with a big table and chairs. There was no one in it, but after about five minutes a few dwarves came with trays of water and bread. Then the big doors banged shut and they were alone.

Steve lowered himself to a chair and cleared his throat. "Thor," he said softly, "would you please tell us what's troubling Loki? He's not himself. We can't really help him if we don't know what's wrong."

For long moments, Tony thought Thor would refuse again. Then he sighed. "Loki did tell me so that I might tell you," he conceded. "And he is going to need our help, whether he wants to admit it or not."

And he began a strange and frightening tale.

Yggdrasil, a place that was not a place, once likened to a great tree, and sometimes called the Tree of Life, the birthplace of all life in the Nine. A place of such terrible power, no one could venture there and live. Somehow, displaying his remarkable ability to defy all odds, Loki had not only fallen into Yggdrasil but survived.

It was painful, listening to Thor describe his brother's ensuing madness. A madness he had somehow managed to hold at bay and concoct a plan to save Earth from Thanos. A madness that was plaguing him again, though Thor wasn't exactly sure how it had happened this time.

"I think he somehow channeled the energy of Yggdrasil to save you when the fire giants attacked that night," Thor said. "Something else that shouldn't be possible." Rueful.

Natasha looked as shell-shocked as Tony felt. "How did he survive?" she asked. "How did he . . . I mean, he didn't seem *insane*. When you brought him to us."

Thor looked away. "He said Thanos tortured him. For a long time. It helped him focus on his own body, bringing him out of the chaos in his mind. In a strange way, it anchored him."

That made a kind of sense to Tony. During the worst time of his life, having something physical to work on had kept him from despairing.

The captain looked grim. "What can we do for him, Thor? We need him."

"And whether we like it or not," Natasha added, "we owe him." She looked meaningfully at Steve and Tony. "We came along with him of our own free will, so none of what happened to us is his fault. He saved our lives. We would be dead without him."

Tony knew how important it was to her to settle all debts. *And he's so much more to me than just an ally. A friend? A lover? Whatever he is, I don't want him to lose himself.*

He'd just found out he might get to have a good long run of it, and he intended to use as much of his new lifespan as possible getting to know Loki.

Silence fell for a long while, each Avenger lost in his or her own thoughts. It was just beginning to feel unbearable when the doors boomed open and that dwarf who'd greeted them strode into the

room. He looked at the untouched water and bread with a frown, as if them not partaking were some great affront.

"Loki has just arrived," he announced, "and you were right." He gave Tony a grudging look. "This armor of yours is . . . impressive. You are welcome to stay as long as Loki needs. My wife will be along shortly to show you to your rooms."

oOo

Two hours later, Tony decided waiting was for the birds. He was practically out of his mind with anxiety. Night had fallen, and though the dwarves had offered the Avengers quite a lavish meal, Tony could barely eat. All he could think about was Loki. Was he okay? Did he need anything? Was he resting?

He'd left his room about an hour ago to try to find answers to his questions, but an axe-wielding guy who looked more like a bear than a person warned him back. He was considering pressing his luck again when the door to his room (which was nice, it had a big bed and a chair and a chest for storing things and a nice wash basin) opened without so much as a knock.

Tony forgave him instantly, however, because it was Loki who walked in. He looked pale, thin, and completely exhausted. It seemed like his armor hung on his frame.

"Your armor will be repaired in a few days," he said, voice hollow. "The dwarves and I came up with a few ways to improve upon the design." With that, he turned as if to go.

Tony had never moved faster in his life. Bolting across the room, he slammed the door and blocked it with an arm. "Whoa, where the hell do you think you're going?"

Loki looked at him, expression completely impassive. "This city rests on top of a vast mine," he said. "I am going to extract some of the metals for your suit."

"And the dwarves can't do that?" Tony demanded.

"It requires magic," Loki said. "Dwarves can't use magic. I'm sure we'll see each other in the morning."

Tony grabbed Loki's wrist and squeezed, trying to yank him back into the room. "No way. You're obviously exhausted. That can wait until you've slept for at least two days."

It wasn't anger that glimmered in Loki's eyes. It was something else. Something more manic. "Let go of me, Stark. I have work to do."

Tony's mind, which had already half formulated an idea, revved up into overdrive. "Thor told me you were able to fight off the madness when Thanos was torturing you," he blurted. "I have a better idea."

He had the dubious pleasure of seeing Loki startled into silence. His green eyes, normally so bright, were almost dull. "A better idea." Flat. "You can't possibly understand what's happening, and yet you have a better idea."

His voice lacked the usual sarcastic snap, the enjoyable banter Tony had come to love. "Maybe not exactly," Tony agreed, "but believe it or not, I went through a time where I would have lost my mind if I didn't have an anchor."

"An anchor." It was said without interest.

"Yeah," Tony said. "An anchor. I can be that for you, Loki. You just need something to focus on. Something that isn't going to drain you more, push you closer to the edge. I can be just that."

Was that a hint of curiosity in Loki's eyes? "And how will you do that, Stark? If you're about to offer sparring, you're not enough of a challenge to even be remotely interesting."

Ignoring the insult was a little difficult, but Tony reminded himself Loki wasn't *himself* right now. "No, not sparring." This time when he tugged, Loki went. "Remember when I said I was a fantastic lover? Let me show you how fantastic."

Loki stopped. "Sex? You're proposing *sex*?"

Tony reached up and poked Loki's forehead. "It's better than pain, and it's just as physical."

For the longest ten or twenty seconds of Tony's life, he thought Loki would refuse and leave. He was warring with himself, it was evident in every taut muscle in his body. Then he suddenly laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound.

"I suppose you're right. Sex is very physical." With that, he started stripping off his armor as he headed for the bed.

Not a very romantic way to begin, Tony thought with a rueful smile. Ah, well. None of their encounters could exactly be called romantic. "No tying me down with magic," he warned.

"Fine," Loki agreed, shocking the hell out of Tony. "But if this doesn't work, I'm leaving. Whether you've reached completion or not."

Taking it to an even less romantic level. Tony didn't let it get to him. He was very sure of his skills in bed.

oOo

For once, being in control was the last thing on Loki's mind as he removed his armor and clothing, carelessly letting it fall on the floor. He didn't particularly want sex, and he had absolutely no expectation of this actually working. Doubtful though he may be, a small part of his mind wanted to see if it *could* work. When he was naked, he turned to find Stark hadn't moved an inch.

Already stretched to the very edge of endurance, Loki raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

Stark's lips twitched. "Helluva way to get a guy's attention," he said with a little smirk.

Considering it was all Loki could do not to dissolve into a laughing, mindless mess, patience wasn't foremost in his thoughts. "You have yet to capture mine," he pointed out, perching on the edge of the bed.

"Usually you just wave your hand and the clothes are gone," Stark reminded, moving toward him and shedding clothes as he went.

"Stop talking," Loki commanded.

It was too jarring to see the words instead of hear them. It would make him laugh. If he started laughing, he wouldn't be able to continue. He just knew it. Whatever pieces of his sanity were left, this was his last chance to gather them up and put them all back together.

Stark was chuckling as he finished stripping, and Loki didn't like it. Made him feel like laughing,

too.

The human wasn't hesitant as he leaned down over Loki. Their mouths connected with a kind of abrupt force, setting off a most interesting reaction. The voices faded behind a burst of color, so bright it made Loki close his eyes and surge up into the kiss. He opened his mouth at once, and Stark didn't need to be asked twice. His tongue plunged inside Loki's mouth, and Loki experienced a blissful *normalcy* when he was able to *taste* the man.

He tasted like the tart blue plums the dwarves picked all over the mountains.

Suddenly hopeful that maybe this would work after all, Loki grabbed Stark's shoulders and toppled backward on the bed. Stark grunted, but their connection wasn't lost. For a few seconds there was an awkward tangle of limbs, but Loki solved that by spreading his thighs so Stark could settle between them.

With a hiss, Loki jerked his head back, eyes squeezing shut. "I can *feel* it," he breathed.

He could practically feel Stark's surprise. "What?"

Tightening his grip on Stark's shoulders further, Loki didn't quite dare open his eyes yet. "Your touch," he said. "I can *feel* it instead of *hear* it or *taste* it." Just skin-on-skin.

Stark moved, and Loki flinched when arms slid under his, wrapping around him. The man lowered himself until they were pressed together, from chest to groin.

"Feel me all over you," Stark murmured, his teeth fastening onto Loki's earlobe.

He bit down. The sting of pain made Loki twitch. It was wholly, blessedly *welcome*. He realized he was clinging to Stark, legs locking around the man's hips. Part of him feared if he let go, his senses would go spiraling out of control again.

"Stop *talking*," he growled, digging his fingernails into Stark's shoulders.

Even though it was wonderful to *hear* instead of *see*.

A low chuckle, reverberating through Loki. The god sucked in a sharp breath when Stark's pelvis rolled into his own. His body reacted at once, more than ready to take interest in these proceedings. Stark was already half hard, and only a few seconds of this had them both fully aroused. Loki hadn't been expecting it, so he felt dizzy at the rush.

Is this actually going to work? He cautiously opened his eyes. Colors still swirled lazily in the air as if stirred up by movement, but he could see Stark's face with no alterations. That was a huge improvement. He shifted under the man.

"I don't want this," he snapped, pushing at his shoulders. "Just do it, Stark."

oOo

Tony gazed down at Loki for a moment, trying to gauge how much he could push right now. Because he *did* want this. More than anything. But the near-frantic gleam to Loki's eyes told him his partner needed this. Needed the connection, the physical intensity *right now*.

"All right," he acquiesced, "we'll do it the way you want. Then we do it the way *I* want."

That brought some of the old Loki back. "Stark—"

"You agreed to let me kiss you as much as I want," Tony reminded him.

"*Kiss*," Loki spat, looking like he was contemplating getting up and leaving.

"Please, Loki."

The god went very still. His green eyes searched Tony's, looking startled and somehow lost, too many things in his eyes for Tony to define.

"Don't beg," he said quietly.

"Then don't make me," Tony countered.

Another brittle silence. Then, "Fine. *Fine*."

"You won't regret it," Tony promised, swooping down for another lengthy kiss.

oOo

When Stark's hands went to his hips, Loki lifted them. There was a moment of fumbling since Stark refused to break the kiss.

"Do you need me to—?" Stark mumbled against Loki's lips.

"No," Loki said shortly. He wanted both the pain and pleasure. Their first time, he'd made sure to ready himself. This time, he didn't. His hand joined Stark's on the man's full arousal, guiding it to his body and using a little seiðr to act as lubricant.

He'd only just barely reached the same state, so Stark couldn't just push past the resistance. Loki was much stronger and not afraid of being hurt. He drove his whole body down.

The shock of penetration, the surprising pain, and the intense feeling of invasion and *closeness* momentarily overwhelmed him, and his mind went blank.

Completely and utterly blank.

No voices.

No colors.

No more taste of blood and death.

No memories that weren't his, no visions of things that were and things that weren't, no whispered promises or demands, no edge of sanity plunging headfirst into black, roiling, terrible chaos.

Nothing.

Nothing except Stark.

"Fuck," Stark breathed, face buried in Loki's neck and inhaling sharply. "How is it even possible you feel so good?"

Just words. He could hear *words*. Loki stared up at the ceiling, chest heaving, the pain making his nerves sing and absolutely relishing it. He rolled his hips and winced, not really able to feel pleasure at this point but not minding. He did it again.

"Move," he whispered, not quite ready for the pain to fade. It just so strongly brought him back into his own body, pulling him from the madness in his mind.

Stark didn't ask that annoying question, '*Are you okay?*' He just lifted himself up a little so he could get enough leverage to obey. He got onto his elbows, putting some space between them, which Loki allowed, and tried to kiss the god again. That, he didn't allow, turning his head to the side.

"Don't," he said. Then, because he *knew* Stark wouldn't let it go at that, "I want to see your face."

Loki almost laughed at the look the man gave him. Then he realized it was just a genuine desire to laugh, not insanity nipping at his heels, so he did. Low and soft. Reaching up, he cupped Stark's face in both hands.

"Your idea is working," he explained, "and watching you is making this more real."

"That's fine," Stark said, low and husky, "since I really like watching you."

Managing not to wince when the man started moving in earnest, Loki gazed up into chocolate brown eyes. They'd gone hazy with pleasure, remained locked on Loki's face. Loki lightly gripped Stark's arms and simply held on, not trying to change the pace. His eyes slid to half mast, wandering all over Stark's face as the man ground into him.

The steady and strong grind burned, a raw sensation that rocked him into the bed. In, an achy resistance to pressure. Out, a rough drag on sensitive flesh.

Eventually, his body adjusted to the feel. When that happened, he was reminded how *good* sex felt. And, despite his fear, the pleasure didn't somehow allow the madness back in. In fact, he felt more like his normal self with every hard, inward thrust.

Who would have thought. I save your life, and you return the favor in the most creative and unforeseeable way.

"What are you smirking about?" Stark demanded, perspiration making his skin gleam.

"Because it would seem what I needed, Anthony, was something *only you* could give me."

Loki's eyes fluttered shut when Stark thrust against his prostate.

"Fuck, it's sexy when you call me by my first name," Stark grunted.

They didn't last very long. Loki didn't touch himself, just let the stimulation to his prostate carry him closer and closer toward bliss. He never took his eyes off Stark's face, watching pleasure play over it. It was oddly enticing, somehow incredibly intimate. Especially since Loki was looking up at him instead of down. A drop of perspiration trickled off Stark's jaw and fell onto Loki's throat, and he was strangely aware of it.

Orgasm overtook him with unexpected suddenness. It didn't give him the usual build up, so had he been of a mind he couldn't prevent himself from coming all over his stomach as pleasure blossomed outward. He could feel himself clenching erratically, and he couldn't quite find the coherency to demand Stark stop.

So the man came inside him.

Loki gasped when he felt a rush of liquid heat. It was . . . different. To feel Stark's pleasure pulsing

inside him was even more intimate than the act itself.

Stark didn't collapse on top of him, but Loki could feel his arms and thighs trembling. Unwinding, he nudged the man to rest on top of him. "It's all right," he murmured, combing fingers through Stark's hair. "You gave me what I wanted. It's only fair I return the favor."

He could feel the man's every breath, a hot wash of damp air against his neck. He continued to run his fingers through Stark's hair, not sure if he was soothing the human or himself as his own heart rate began to slow. The pair lay quietly for several long moments.

Then Loki smiled. Stark, who had only half softened, was hardening inside him again. Stark lifted himself a little, and Loki didn't recognize the look in his dark eyes when he smiled.

"My turn."

Thirty-Sixth Installment: Interlude

Okay, this is self-indulgent crap ahead. You can skip to the scene break if you don't like pointless citrus.

Thirty-Sixth Installment, Interlude: Loki's Promise

For the first half hour or so, Tony kept thinking he was dreaming. Normally after a round of sex, he needed to rest for a while before he could go again. Maybe because of the Tesseract, his stamina seemed to have tripled. He'd gotten fully aroused after orgasm in less than two minutes, and right now he had a very compliant Norse god of mischief lying beneath him. It all felt too good to be anything but a dream.

Loki had kept his word. In the last twenty minutes he hadn't really stopped kissing his partner for more than a few seconds, and Loki hadn't uttered so much as a look of complaint. In fact, the god was so beautifully responsive Tony had about made up his mind. *Yep. I think I'm in love.*

They were aligned from head to foot. Loki's legs were tangled around Tony's, and he currently had three fingers working inside the god. *Is it all right if I think of him as my lover?* Loki had accepted everything Tony wanted, and the man had only one complaint.

Loki was still being so *quiet*, but he didn't want to push his luck by demanding he let out his voice more. The god just let out these faint, breathy little gasps now and then, and when Tony massaged his prostate just so it made Loki pant. So far, he'd only gotten one faint moan, one he'd happily swallowed during their last kiss.

Watching Loki seemed to be his new favorite activity. The god was laying with his black hair fanned out on the pillow, hands resting beside his head. His expression was one of complete relaxation, which was gratifying. That frightening edge of madness was gone, his verdant eyes bright once more. Tony wasn't shy about flattering himself; his idea deserved credit. *I deserve credit. Would he have gone to Thor for help like this? Nope. Just me.*

So what if Loki hadn't actually come to him for help? Tony still deserved credit.

Loki abruptly gave him the barest hint of a smile. It had the usual smirk mixed in. "You're being awfully attentive to my pleasure, Stark. What about your needs?"

I really, really love his voice. "I'll get to them," he murmured, leaning down to fuse their mouths together once more.

It was a languid, slow, borderline lazy kiss. His tongue roamed around inside Loki's mouth, curling around Loki's, writhing around in a kind of erotic, wet tango. Loki responded to everything, eyes closed in apparent bliss. One of his hands came up to tangle in Tony's hair, neither tugging nor directing, just stroking through the dark strands. And Tony absolutely loved it. He loved Loki touching him, since their trysts up to now had been altogether lacking in that regard.

He'd let his own free hand map every inch of Loki's skin it could reach, and he'd learned a lot about what Loki did and didn't like. He didn't like it when Tony did anything more than lightly brush over his nipples. He seemed to enjoy Tony stroking his waist and inner thighs, but he didn't seem to particularly care when Tony paid any attention to his arousal.

He hadn't protested even a little, though, when Tony started fingering him.

And even though Loki was quiet, his face did have little tells of enjoyment. It was all in his eyes and mouth, a slight tightening of disapproval when he didn't like something, or a slight curving up at the corners of his lips when he did . . . the tiniest hint of a warning in green eyes or total contentment. And even though Loki was being very complacent, Tony didn't want to push his luck. Complacent wasn't the same as allowing anything in the sex book.

The kiss grew a little messy, and Tony felt a bead of saliva trail down Loki's cheek. He caught it with his thumb, smearing it before Loki let out something like a tiny growl and bit Tony's tongue. Not hard, but a clear warning. Tony chuckled and decided he'd had enough foreplay for the moment. Finally withdrawing his fingers, he was pleased to feel the barest hint of a shiver crawl over Loki's skin. He sat up.

"I want you to ride me," he said.

Loki didn't hesitate, following Tony up. When Tony laid back, he stopped Loki from climbing over him with a smile. "Not that way, gorgeous. Face the other way."

Surprise flickered briefly over Loki's face, but it was replaced quickly by curiosity. He didn't protest, straddling Tony's hips backward. It gave the man a new and incredibly enticing view. With one hand on Loki's waist and the other holding his all-but-begging length, he guided Loki down and watched himself disappear into the god now above him.

Once he was fully sheathed, he grasped Loki's wrists and gently tugged them back. It caused Loki's spine to arch, and it was beautiful. There wasn't a centimeter of Loki that wasn't beautiful, and Tony's greedy eyes took in the firm muscle, the slightly too-visible ribs, the way ebony hair fell around the perfect, pale neck, the taut, graceful shoulders.

Loki made a faintly amused sound. "Will you move, Stark, or shall I?"

An undertone of arousal colored his voice, only just audible. Given the way he was holding Loki, it would make it really awkward for him to set the pace. So Tony took charge of that, rolling his hips, a long and slow and deep motion that made Loki's spine arch again. The muscle rippled beneath ivory skin, and Tony wondered how that could possibly be so erotic. Was this beauty even capable of being un-sexy?

After a few moments of careful angling, he found Loki's prostate again. His arousal seemed to do what fingers could not, eliciting a whisper of a moan. *Fuck, that's so god-damn sexy!* He ground up hard and constant, trying to never ease the pressure against that magic little button, wanting to hear more. So much more. He wouldn't demand it, because earlier Loki had finally come all over them, and even better he'd allowed Tony to come inside him.

He definitely wanted to do that again. It was a massive turn-on, knowing he'd filled Loki with his seed.

Another several moments of this, and he released Loki's wrists. He had no way of knowing how long he'd have to wait for this compliant Loki again, so he wanted to do as much as he could before his stamina ran out. When he stopped moving, Loki shifted to look over his shoulder.

Tony decided it would be safer to ask for what he wanted than command. "Feel like trying some different positions?"

For a second, he thought Loki would refuse. Then he lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "If you like."

"Then lay down on your stomach," Tony said, trying to make it sound like a suggestion.

Another hesitation while Loki clearly debated whether or not he would acquiesce. Then, to Tony's surprise and delight, he lifted his hips to obey.

oOo

Though Loki wasn't about to do anything he didn't want just because Stark wanted it, he had made a promise. That promise would only allow so much, but after a few seconds of deliberation he decided to go along with Stark's request. He was exhausted, yes, and it was somehow nice to let Stark do all the work and simply enjoy the man's ministrations. Because as it turned out, Stark hadn't been lying.

He was a skilled lover.

Climbing off Stark, he laid down on his stomach. Stark prompted Loki to lift his hips, and when he did the man slid a pillow beneath them. Well, that was thoughtful. He let Stark position him to his liking, and then the human draped himself over Loki's back before sliding back inside him.

Loki reflexively shivered. The initial moment of penetration was probably the best part. A feeling of not-quite-violation but definitely not comfort, pleasure and the intensity of being joined in such an intimate place.

"Is this okay?" Stark murmured in his ear, hands stroking up and down Loki's arms.

"As long as you keep moving," Loki said, pushing back into Stark's hips a little.

Stark obeyed the not-quite-request, and Loki fell easily into the man's slow but deep rhythm. *Whatever else you might be, Stark, you certainly are attentive.* The human had picked up on every nonverbal cue as to what Loki liked, didn't like, didn't care for, or simply loved. He felt a bit like a well-played harp in Stark's capable hands, and he didn't regret his decision even a little. Though sex hadn't been his intent, he was glad he'd allowed this.

Even if it was a mistake to let Stark so close. So intimately, invasively, inescapably close.

Doors were being opened now that wouldn't so easily shut.

In, out. Back, forward. A delicious drag of skin on skin, friction and pressure. The pleasure was sweetly begging Loki to give in to it, to let Stark sweep him away in a wave of sensation. The cool sheets had warmed under the combined heat of their bodies, the pillow under his hips doing little more than brushing over his aroused length. Stark slid the hand not bracing himself under Loki's belly, pressing into his abdomen almost like a massage. For such an innocuous touch, it was quite erotic.

He'd definitely never had sex like this.

It felt like a long, long time of this lazy pleasure before Stark began building up a faster, stronger pace. He had this way of moving his pelvis in the most delicious way that somehow sent a glitter-bright burst of pleasure singing along Loki's nerves. He rewarded Stark's effort with a faint moan, well aware how much the man loved hearing him. When Stark did it again, Loki shuddered.

Stark's massaging hand strayed lower, not quite too low, pressing more firmly. It felt so strangely good, and Loki felt completion rushing up on him again. Just as his muscles started to tense and the first wave of pleasure began, the man abruptly reached down and clasped the base of his arousal and squeezed. Loki's eyes snapped open, head coming up with a vicious warning ready on his tongue.

"Stark-"

"Just trust me," Stark breathed in his ear.

This was taking things a bit too far, but before Loki could voice a protest Stark did that *thing* again. For some reason, having orgasm choked off just as it began made the stimulation to his prostate almost unbearably intense, and this time Loki simply couldn't stop the gasp that ended in a soft moan.

Because Stark kept doing that, every firm thrust pushing Loki harder and harder into a release that he just couldn't reach because of Stark's damn hand. The fingers of which kept rhythmically squeezing tighter until Loki felt he would go mad for entirely new reasons.

Then, without any warning at all, Stark released him. He grabbed Loki's arms and tugged them back by the elbow. It forced his spine to arch, somehow allowing Stark to thrust so deeply it took Loki's breath away, the pressure against his prostate sending him spiraling into an orgasm so powerful his vision whited out and his senses utterly deserted him.

All senses save the ability to feel.

And the pleasure lit up every nerve-ending in his body. Stark pushed him higher and higher, and then everything drifted away, leaving him floating on a golden cloud.

ooo

Tony had no way of knowing how the dwarves told time, but he knew on Earth it would be *late* by the time he finally ran out of energy. He'd made love six times to a Loki who grew more compliant with every orgasm, after which he passed out.

Though he himself was pretty much done for, Tony managed to haul himself out of bed and wet a cloth in the wash basin to clean them both up enough he could relax. Then he climbed back onto the bed and dragged Loki into his arms. Not an iota of tension remained in Loki's skinny body as he draped over Tony's chest.

Despite how tired he was, Tony found himself unable to sleep. It was still difficult to believe what had just happened. What he'd just spent the last . . . what, four hours? doing. And to whom he' been doing it. He tangled his fingers in Loki's ebony hair. It was a little damp, but it still slid through his fingers like silk. *God, you're beautiful.*

Loki stirred. "Why aren't you asleep, Stark?" he murmured, voice adorably slurred.

Tony smiled, pressing his lips to Loki's forehead. "Just thinking how amazing you are," he replied quietly.

"And does that commonly keep you awake?" Loki inquired, his hand sliding over Tony's ribs.

Tony couldn't help chuckling. Exhausted Loki was cute. "More than it should," he admitted freely. Then, because it was still on his mind, "Is this going to help you on a lasting basis? Or am I going to need to be your personal sex-god from now on?"

Loki laughed. It was a low, soft sound, utterly relaxed. "You weren't lying when you said you were a skilled lover."

The words sent a thrill through Tony. "Not to nitpick, but I said *fantastic* lover," he pointed out.

Another soft chuckle. "Fantastic, then."

So, well-fucked Loki is amenable and actually very sweet, Tony made a mental note. "You should sleep," he said. "You need it way more than I do."

Loki said nothing more, and after a few moments Tony realized it was because Loki *had* fallen back to sleep. A surge of all-too warm emotion flooded his breast, and whatever lingering doubts he might have had vanished. He closed his eyes and didn't feel the dread he'd half expected.

I'm in love.

He fell asleep with that realization flowing around in his heart.

oOo

Intense pain in his chest woke Tony with a cry several hours later. His entire body jerked, startling both him and Loki into full wakefulness. The mage looked alarmed, sitting up.

"What is it?"

Tony grabbed at the Arc reactor. He'd never felt pain from it before, not like this. It felt like the thing was trying to tear his chest apart from the inside out. "What's happening - ?" he gasped, vision graying at the edges.

Loki's hand covered his, pulling it away. "The regenerative magic," he said. "Is this device some sort of healing implement?"

"It's . . . preventing shrapnel from . . . my heart," Tony gasped, bowing forward. His vision was beginning to darken.

It still managed to surprise him, after all this time, how *strong* Loki was as he pushed Tony down on the bed. "Your body is trying to heal around the shrapnel," he said, voice clinical and emotionless. "Lie still. This is going to hurt."

So saying, his hand started glowing bright green and he plunged it into Tony's chest.

Did he scream? Did his heart burst? Did he stop breathing and die? It certainly felt like it. Whatever Loki was doing hurt just as much as the initial injury all those years ago. Tony wanted to grab Loki's arm and make him stop, but he couldn't move. He couldn't do anything except lie on the bed with his entire body screaming in protest of this abuse, trembling wildly.

Was it possible to die from pain?

"I'm sorry, Anthony. It's over, I'm done. You're all right."

After probably a year or so, the red cleared from Tony's vision and he realized the pain was diminishing. Blinking, he found himself gazing up into the gentlest expression he'd ever seen on Loki's face. *Did he really just say that? Or was I completely hallucinating?*

Loki's lips curved in a smile when Tony focused on him. He held up his hand for the human to see, and there were three pieces of metal on his palm. Two were quite small, the third was as large as both Tony's thumbnails. Enormous, for something embedded in his heart. He stared blankly.

"You . . . pulled them out?"

"I did," Loki confirmed. He looked down beside Tony's head. "That thing, too. Given the nature of

its existence, you don't need it any longer."

Startled, Tony turned his head to find the Arc reactor lying there. Its faint glow, so familiar, sent an automatic pang of anxiety through him. He was too used to needing it. Carefully, he sat up and looked down at his chest. The shallow valley for the reactor was gone. Only smooth skin greeted his eyes. It was the most shocking thing he'd seen yet on this expedition.

"It's gone," he murmured. "You healed me?"

"No," Loki replied. "Well, not directly. The regenerative ability with which I imbued you is what healed you. All I did was remove the shrapnel."

Reaching up, Tony rubbed his hand over the smooth area. "I can't believe it. I've carried that thing so long, and now it's . . . gone. It's just gone."

"Is that a bad thing?" Loki inquired, setting the shrapnel on the bedside table and picking up the Arc reactor. He turned it in his hands, eyes curious.

"Bad?" Tony mused. "No, not bad. Just very strange."

"If your body rejected the thing keeping you alive," Loki said, sounding a tad distracted, "that means the regenerative magic has fully integrated with your body's functions. That's good. This device is really quite clever. However did you dream it up?"

Being called clever, even indirectly, made Tony pretty damn happy. "I'll tell you the story sometime," he promised, grabbing the reactor and tossing it on the table. He then flopped backward on the bed, yanking Loki with him. "Right now, I want to sleep more."

Loki didn't protest or resist, resting his head where Tony's shoulder met his chest. "As do I," he murmured. He ran a cool hand over the place where the Arc reactor had once been. "It's a little strange not to see it there."

"Tell me about it," Tony muttered, already drifting back off to sleep.

He had a feeling when he woke up, it was going to be pretty fucking weird.

Thirty-Seventh Installment

Thirty-Seventh Installment: The Rest of the Journey

"Do you remember what you were doing there in the dark?"

The question sets off a series of random images in his mind. Does he remember what he was doing in the dark? In that terribly dark, endlessly dark, inescapably dark place where he'd fallen? I didn't do it on purpose, you idiot. I didn't just decide to go out for a walk and get lost when I ventured off the path. For no reason at all, he finds that absurdly hilarious. He laughs, and he thinks how his companion is called Mad Titan, yet he is not the mad one.

Companion? No. That is too playful a word. Tormentor. He cannot call Mad Titan his captor, because he hasn't tried to escape.

Hasn't even really considered escaping.

Could I escape? There's no door. Surely I can't escape if there's no door. Am I in a room? No walls, but then he remembers there are chains around his wrists. Chains that cause him pain every time he thinks about them.

How odd.

"No," he finally cackles. "I don't remember the dark."

Well, that's untrue. He remembers all too well. What he means is, he doesn't want to remember. But Mad Titan doesn't need such a specific answer.

"Don't lie to me, Loki."

That is even more amusing.

He hisses in pain (or is that another laugh?) when Mad Titan activates the obelisk to which Loki is chained. The thing is perhaps a meter tall, and it is covered in snaking, tangled runes. Each one is capable of eliciting a different sort of torturous response, and Mad Titan tends to use them all at once. It is terrible. There are no words to describe it, but he has come to crave this. The pain is so numbingly intense, so powerfully agonizing, that it allows him to focus on nothing else. It grounds him, terrible though it is.

"I want to know; how are you not dead?"

And Loki doesn't understand the question, because he is dead. He has been ever since he fell.

oOo

Tony floundered out of sleep when he felt the body next to him flail with a low cry. It set his heart to racing as he sat bolt-upright. Loki had his back to him, chest heaving and naked skin covered in a fine sheen of perspiration. Tony scooted toward him, gently squeezing slim shoulders.

"What is it?" he asked, trying to calm his own heart.

Loki rubbed a hand over his face, pushing disheveled black hair out of his eyes. "It's nothing," he said, rolling his shoulders. "Don't touch me, Stark."

There was no venom in his tone, but there was neither any tolerance. It hurt, and Tony removed his hands. *Are you ever gonna thaw toward me? I just spent all night fucking you. Why d'ya have to be so cold now?* "I can't help it," he said. "When a person I love is in pain, I want to fix it."

. . . *shit.*

The room went deathly still. Loki slowly straightened, looking directly ahead. After what felt like an eternity, green eyes met dark brown. "I don't ever want to hear something so idiotic from your mouth again, Stark."

With grace and surprising poise for someone naked, Loki rose from the bed. As soon as his feet were touching the floor, he sort of shimmered like a mirage. In an instant, all evidence of last night's activities disappeared from his body. Fully clothed in his ornate leather armor, he gave Tony a frozen, emotionless look.

"The dwarves will see to a meal for you," he said, voice overly formal and stiff. "I'm going to help them in the mines. If you see the others, please inform them." With that, he swept from the room.

Tony flung himself backward, not sure if he was more angry at himself or at Loki. Okay, he definitely hadn't meant to spill that little epiphany in that way. But he definitely hadn't expected Loki to react like *that*. Last night had seemed like such tremendous, enormous progress. The things he'd allowed Tony to do . . . a person didn't fuck like that with another person if there were no feelings attached.

It hadn't been fucking, it had straight up been making love. Romantic, sappy making love. Including after-sex cuddling and then after, after-sex cuddling.

Last night was good. I was just beginning to think he would actually let me in after all.

What was it Thor had said? Placing his affections unwisely? *Way to go, idiot. Said something too heavy too fast, and now Loki's gone into fight or flight.* There was only one way to rectify this, and it would involve a whole lot of the one thing he wasn't good at.

Talking about his feelings.

With the one person in creation who was even *worse* at it than Tony Stark.

oOo

The first thing Steve did when he was awake, washed up, and dressed was gather the rest of Avengers to him. Even Tony was awake, which was good. As soon as they'd assembled in a sort of private courtyard to which they'd been given free access, he took stock.

His, Natasha's, and Tony's injuries were healed. Everyone else was fine. The dwarves had promised Ironman's suit would be finished by tomorrow morning. They'd been given food and a safe place to rest. Things seemed to be looking good, except for one unknown.

"Has anyone seen Loki?" he asked as soon as he was done with his once-over of the humans.

Thor shook his head.

Steve looked to Tony next. The man gave no verbal reply, but the captain could see in his body language what he didn't say.

"Stark?" he prompted.

Who gave him a slight glare. "Yes."

"When?"

"Last night. This morning."

Steve might not be as sexually adventurous as Tony, but he got the inference with no extra elucidation. Judging by his tone, that had been a continuous timeline. Surprising. *I didn't know they were that comfortable with each other. Or that Stark was so nuts.*

"How was he?" he asked, ignoring Thor's thunderous look of disapproval.

"Physically?" Tony said, voice now surprisingly venomous, "he seemed just fine. Dandy. Using magic like a champ. Mentally? Back to his old self. Emotionally? Fucking retarded prick."

More surprises.

It was Natasha who got over her shock first. "Something happen?"

"Nothing I feel like talking about, and nothing that's any of your business," Stark snapped, his eyes taking in all of them and lingering on Thor.

Who actually looked slightly abashed.

Interesting. Steve suddenly wished he had Natasha's gift for reading people. Or Loki's, for that matter. "Do you know where he went . . . when he left?" he asked, hoping that didn't sound indelicate. Stark was right, it wasn't anyone's business what he did with Loki.

Even if doing *anything* with Loki was a really bad idea.

Looking put-upon, Tony sighed and folded his arms. "Said he was going to help the dwarves mine for some type of metal. Apparently only magic can extract it."

Thor shifted. "Sky iron. Dwarves also call it mage iron, because if magic isn't used in the mining, the liquid turns to dust and is completely useless."

"It's liquid?" Tony asked, seeming to regain his usual composure.

The Aesir nodded. "Yes. I don't know how the process works, but during the extraction the liquid solidifies into something much harder than steel. It is also many times lighter, and no metal is better for enchanting."

Steve had a sudden desire to see the process in action. *Later.* "How are you three doing?" he asked, looking to Stark, Natasha, and Clint. "No negative side effects?"

"It's Loki," Natasha said with a little smirk. "I think if anyone knows what he's doing, it's him."

"That's her way of saying, no negative side effects," Clint piped up.

"Though one particularly weird one," Tony said. He tapped his chest. "It's gone."

Bruce blinked. "The Arc reactor?"

"Yeah," Tony replied. "Loki said my body rejected it because it wasn't needed. In fact, pulled the shrapnel right out of my chest."

"My eyesight is even better than it was," Clint said.

"And my reflexes," Natasha added.

"Actually, I feel younger," Tony said after a second. "Like I did when I was twenty-five. Stronger." He flexed his knees and shoulders a little, only just noticing. "And I did notice last night my stamina seemed to have increased."

Steve instantly felt a flush. Yeah, really only one inference, there. Bruce looked uncomfortable, too, but Natasha just gave Stark a tiny, knowing grin. And of course, Stark himself seemed to think there was nothing at all wrong with what he'd just said.

"So this metal," Bruce said, looking at Thor as if desperate for a change of topic, "is there any chance the dwarves would let me in on the process?"

"Most likely, if Loki agreed," Thor said with a frown. "Dwarves and Aesir have never gotten along, so I'm not even sure how Loki has entrenched himself in their good graces."

"It's Loki," Natasha said again.

Stark snorted.

"How do the dwarves enchant things if they can't use magic?" Bruce asked.

Steve nodded thoughtfully. Good question.

Thor folded his arms and drummed his fingers against his bicep. "The way my mother described it, they are imbuing magical properties into their weapons and armor, but the magic doesn't come from them. Like the dark elves, they are harvesting it from elsewhere. Magic abounds in Nidavellir."

That didn't make much sense to Steve.

Stark waved toward Thor's warhammer. "That thing was forged by the dwarves, right?"

Thor nodded. "Long ago. As a wedding gift to the Allfather." He pushed off the wall against which he'd been leaning. "I will attempt to find someone to ask about the mines."

"Can the witch reach us here?" Steve asked.

"No," Thor answered. "Even if she could find us, the dwarves would never allow her free passage inside the city."

Immediate concern thus assuaged, Steve nodded. "Then how about some breakfast?"

ooo

A doe-eyed female dwarf led Bruce and Tony out into the city. Though Bruce was content to walk in silence and take in the sights, Tony (as usual) immediately barraged the dwarf with questions. Predominantly about Loki.

"My people don't like the Aesir," she told them with a sniff. "They make demands of us and act like they're so much better than we are, and yet I don't see *them* creating armors and weapons of such magnificence. Their two greatest weapons, Mjölfnir and Gungnir, were both made by *us*."

"But Loki was different from the moment he came here," she continued. She smoothed her pale

blue smock, an unconscious gesture no doubt, and it spoke volumes of her feelings. She even blushed a little. "He wasn't falsely polite, he didn't attempt to flatter us. He acknowledged our skills and offered to trade fairly for them."

He comes by his nickname Silvertongue honestly, Bruce thought with an inward smile. It's almost hard to believe he can be so charming. My first impression of him wasn't a good one.

"My brothers, Sindri and Brokk, she went on, "adore him. He has helped them in the mines so much. When last he was here, he extracted enough sky iron to last us through many projects we had despaired of completing. And all he asked in return was a small supply to build a staff. And our help in making it, of course." She giggled.

Giggled. Like a silly schoolgirl. Bruce shook his head. The power Loki had over people seemed to be immense, and Bruce didn't quite understand the appeal. Sure, the guy wasn't ugly. But he was just so . . .

Dangerous. He's too dangerous.

He noticed she was watching him with a frown. "You don't like him?" She made it sound like an accusation.

Bruce cleared his throat and shot Tony a quick look. The man had a tiny smirk on his face.

"Well," the physicist said after a slight pause, "he definitely knows how to make an impression on people."

She raised an eyebrow.

Shrugging, Bruce scratched the back of his neck. "I mean, he certainly made a splash when he introduced himself to us."

The female dwarf continued on. "Well, I don't even understand what Loki could be doing with humans in the first place. Why would he have need to go to *Midgard* of all places? It's so *ordinary* there. No magic. There's nothing special about it."

"Just seven billion humans living there," Tony said. "No big deal."

"Hmph. You humans breed even more rapaciously than rodents."

"A little bitter about your place on the magic totem pole?" Tony challenged with an irreverent grin.

Bruce found himself struggling not to smile. It wasn't nice to find humor in the misfortune of others. Real or imagined though they may be.

The dwarf glared before resuming walking. She led them, now a little stiff-backed, to the entrance of the mine. "I'm not going down there," she said. "It's filthy. Just follow the path. You'll find miners right away, just ask them and they will take you to Loki. Try not to get in the way too much." With that, she whirled and stalked away.

"Touched a nerve?" Bruce murmured, leaning a little toward Tony.

Who snorted. "Ya think? Geez. Why does everyone we meet either love the shit outta Loki or want him dead for some horrible offense?"

"Wondering why you got involved with such a madman?" Bruce inquired with a small grin.

"Hey, your bread is my butter," Tony said.

Bruce blinked. "That made no sense."

"Exactly," Tony agreed. "Finally, someone who understands."

Shaking his head, Bruce followed him down.

oOo

Soothing, comforting green seiðr flowed in a fine mist from Loki's palms down into the vein of sky iron. He'd always thought that was a ridiculous name for the silvery-gold metal, since it wasn't iron. On either side of him stood two hairy-faced dwarves, Sindri and Brokk, who were two of the best dwarven craftsmen in the city. They'd been the ones to aid Loki in the making of his Aether staff.

And both of them had independently expressed to Loki a willingness to do anything for him should he need.

Including die.

Loki was *never* one to let such loyalties fade. This was a relationship he'd spent a great deal of time nurturing. So far, he'd reaped the rewards over and over. And he'd expended only a little bit of magic in the process. Mining sky iron was one of the easiest uses of magic.

While Loki poured seiðr into the vein of sky iron, the two dwarf brothers waited with special barrels to capture the liquid metal. Once the barrels were full, they covered them and put them into an enchanted device which compressed the lid, forcing the liquid to heavier and heavier density. There it would stay for up to a month before extraction. Then it would be as malleable as gold with ten times the hardness of steel.

Truly, it was a marvelous substance. And it was also the easiest metal in the Nine to enchant, another thing Loki was very good at. The easier the metal to enchant, the less energy he had to expend.

In just an hour, Loki had filled three barrels with the precious metal. So perfect was his control of magic that not a drop of seiðr was wasted, no energy expended unnecessarily. And when the brothers adjusted the barrels, he saw them deliberately put their hands into the seiðr flow. He knew it would feel like a warm, extremely pleasant tingle to them.

He was halfway through filling the fourth when a third dwarf trotted into the tunnel with two humans in tow. Loki gritted his teeth.

He'd managed to spend his entire morning *not* thinking about Stark, and here the fool was. *Why couldn't I have thrown myself into a physical tangle with any other Avenger? Any of them would have accepted my repudiation and moved on. But not Stark. No, not him.*

"Loki?" Brokk said, rough voice low.

Loki relaxed his jaw, realizing the flow of seiðr had gotten noticeably darker. The color shifted to its normal pale green.

"You have been unwell," Sindri said. "Perhaps this should be our last barrel for today."

Shaking his head, Loki tried to ignore the presences at his back. "I'm fine. I promised you another

five, did I not?"

"Even one is a tremendous boon to my people," Brokkr said. "You are generous as always, Loki."

The reverence in his tone made the god of mischief smile. "You have more than earned this favor from me. How many times have you aided me in the last nine moon-spans?"

"Twice, that I can recall," Sindri said at once with a gravelly chuckle. "We owe *you*, Loki."

"And he always collects," Stark commented.

That made both brothers turn to the human with downright poisonous glares. "Do not speak, human. The wit of a rock beetle has nothing to contribute."

"Ouch," Stark said, not sounding particularly wounded.

"Stark is one of the cleverest humans you will ever find," Loki said without thinking. "The armor you were so keen to get your hands on was envisioned and built by *him*." He closed his teeth around his errant tongue with an audible click.

What in Borr's name was that? I sound like a maiden defending her betrothed!

And he could *feel* Stark glowing at the praise. "Ya hear that, you furry-faced moles? I'm probably the smartest guy in this hole - except for him."

Loki didn't need to look to know who Stark meant. He ground his teeth. "Did you come down here for a reason?" he demanded, making sure his voice was cold. "Or are you simply here to provide comic relief? If so, the distraction is unwelcome."

"Jesus you're a cold bastard," Stark said. "I *came* to see if we could help."

Now irritated for a plethora of reasons, Loki cut off the flow of seiðr and rounded on the human. "I already told you sky iron requires magic to extract. Unless you've picked up that ability in the last hour, you'll only be in the way. Leave."

He could feel Stark's displeasure, knew his words were hurtful. *Good. I don't want your love, you fool, and it's the last thing I need.*

"D'you mind if we talk for a sec?" the man asked.

"I have work to do, Stark," Loki said, returning his full attention to the vein of sky iron. "If you insist on pointless confabulation, then waste my time this evening when I'm done."

He heard Stark let out a faint hiss. "God you're a bastard." His footsteps seemed to echo louder than when he'd entered.

One set. Which meant Banner was still there. Loki suppressed a sigh. "If you stay, Dr. Banner, you can make yourself useful by helping with the barrels." He nodded with his head toward the three full ones. "They need to be sealed."

Banner didn't speak, he just got busy.

But Loki could feel the judgment, and it irritated him. Like a burr under his skin. He ignored it. *I owe neither him nor Stark a damn thing.*

Thirty-Eighth Installment

Thirty-Eighth Installment: A Long Road

"Thor, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Something in Stark's voice convinced Thor this was important, so he smiled an apology to his dwarf companion and excused himself. Tony just started walking, not speaking as he led the way out of the hall and outside. His entire posture spoke of his tension and unhappiness.

Thor found himself studying the man's face. The small lines that had once crinkled it had smoothed. He didn't look *younger*, quite, but he looked more . . . ageless.

"I wanted to talk to you, as well," he said, since the human didn't seem inclined to go first.

Stark looked up at him, his brown eyes darker than usual. "Shoot."

Assuming that was an invitation, Thor sighed softly. "How is Loki? Truly?" The rest of the Avengers might be able to accept Tony's word he was fine, but Thor knew better than any of them how dangerous Loki's state was.

Tony's eyes narrowed, staring straight ahead with a glare. "He seems back to his old, frigid self."

"Tell me," Thor tried to make it sound like a request and not a command.

Raking fingers through his dark hair, Tony heaved a sigh. "I had an idea about how to help ground him. I suggested we have sex. Thought it was a better alternative than pain. Best part was, it seemed to work, too."

The way he just blurted that out almost made Thor smile. As if he sincerely didn't care what the god of thunder thought.

Tony abruptly stopped, whirling to face Thor in a surprisingly aggressive stance. "I fucked him *six* times. I've never seen him so relaxed or so sweet. I know he enjoyed himself as thoroughly as I did. When we finally stopped, he curled up with me and he fell asleep. And this morning, I think a nightmare woke him up. And he was right back to the same bastard he was before. What is *wrong* with him?"

As much as the vulgar confession irritated Thor, the underlying emotion erased it just as quickly. Tony was hurt. Hurt by Loki's rejection. If he was just playing, it would be a very different face he'd be showing right now. Thor was sure of that. His heart hurt for both of them. Reaching out, he squeezed Tony's shoulder.

"I did try to warn you," he pointed out gently.

Tony slapped his hand away. "Don't say I told you so. Tell me what I need to do to get that prickly bastard's attention so he knows I'm not going anywhere. I'm crazy about him, and I *know* he likes me too. Maybe even loves me. He wouldn't let anyone else fuck him like that!"

Thor gave him a rueful smile. "You're right about that." *Much as I dislike hearing you speak of him in such a manner.* "The only thing you can do is talk to him. Words are Loki's power. Gentle persistence thawed him toward me, but it took a great deal of effort on my part. Loki has suffered much betrayal and pain in his life, and it has put walls of thick ice around his heart. Show him it's

safe to let you in." Because Thor was sure it *was* safe.

For several moments, Stark just looked up at Thor with an inscrutable expression. Then, "I have your approval?"

"Yes," Thor replied. And he meant it. "Treat him with love and respect, and you will always have it. Hurt him, and I will kill you."

It wasn't a threat or even a warning. Thor's voice didn't change, because he wasn't trying to discourage Tony. He simply wanted him to know the elder's stance, because Thor didn't speak idly. He meant it.

Stark's eyes searched his, then he gave a jerky nod. "I'll remember that."

After Stark left him alone, Thor headed toward the mines. He didn't enter, knowing Loki would react to his presence with increased hostility if he was with anyone else. He simply waited, settling himself into a comfortable position and meditating. So much had happened in such a short time, it almost felt like he was a completely different person. Closing his eyes, he pictured Jane's face.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Loki imbued her with regenerative energy so she would live far longer than her human lifespan would normally allow? The idea of spending centuries or even millennia with her was immensely appealing.

It was somewhere between high noon and dusk when the dwarves and Loki emerged, and Thor was a little surprised to see Dr. Banner with them. He rose, and at least Loki's expression wasn't as hostile as usual when he saw his brother. Thor walked to them.

"You look better," he murmured, though Loki still seemed tired. "Walk with me?"

Loki didn't protest, nodding to the two dwarves and Banner. Thor led him away, resisting the urge to offer him an arm or embrace him or something. When had his brother started seeming so *fragile*?

"Whatever is on your mind Thor," Loki said after a few more moments of silence, "is there a way to dissuade you from making me hear it?"

To actually hear a nearly-polite request made Thor smile. "No, little brother."

Loki sighed and lowered himself down onto a boulder in the mountain face. "Then what is it?"

Thor frowned. "You need to rest, Loki. Actually rest. If you keep doing this to yourself, how will you be any kind of challenge to the witch?"

"I slept for several hours last night," Loki pointed out with an irritated look up.

"You need several *days* of rest," Thor insisted. "And I wanted to ask you about Stark."

Every muscle in Loki's body went tense, and he rose as if to stalk off. Thor didn't let him, grabbing his arm and pushing him back down with gentle force. That earned him a venomous glare.

"Ask me what?" he snapped. "You have no business asking me anything."

"Perhaps not," Thor agreed softly, "but whether you want it or not I care about you. I love you, Loki. You're my brother, and I will always be concerned about you."

"I don't want -"

"You don't want my concern," Thor interrupted, "so you've said. You have it nonetheless. And denying it won't change anything, so stop wasting your breath and energy."

That actually earned him a smile lost between rueful and amused resignation. "Fine. I can't stop you being concerned. But you should stop wasting *your* energy, brother. I'm fine."

"You're not," Thor countered. "You're exhausted, you're far too thin, and you're completely emotionally wrung out. Stark was quite candid with me about his feelings, Loki. Why do you push him away?"

The venom came back to emerald eyes. "Again, *none of your business*."

"I won't let this go, so you may as well save yourself the trouble and just tell me."

Thor waited patiently while Loki continued to glare. After long moments of this, Thor found himself wondering why Loki didn't simply vanish in a haze of green smoke like he normally did when he truly meant for a conversation to be over. Eventually, it occurred to him that perhaps Loki *wanted* to be called on this. Perhaps he needed someone to convince him it was safe to let Stark love him.

And love Stark in return.

Kneeling in front of his brother, Thor put his large hands on Loki's skinny knees. "Loki, what is the cause of your resistance? Is it a fear of being hurt again? Betrayed again? You realize Stark has nothing to gain by loving you? And yet he does."

Loki blinked, actually appearing startled by those words. "You make him sound like a fool."

Thor gave him a tiny grin. "Is he not?"

His brother let out a faint, helpless laugh. "A bigger fool than you." His mirth faded quickly. "Why are you pushing this, brother? I would have thought you'd never approve."

"He loves you," Thor said. "For apparently no reason. You tried to conquer his world, kill him and his friends, and have been nothing but cold and cruel toward him. And yet he loves you. What does that say about him?"

"That he's an idiot," Loki quipped.

Thor frowned. "Do you believe yourself unworthy of love, Loki?"

Loki rose a little too quickly, almost toppling Thor over. "I'm done talking about this. I want to leave in the morning, Thor. Please have our human friends ready to go by then."

When Thor tried to restrain him this time, Loki turned into a crow and winged for the sky. Thor watched with a sinking heart. Whether it was true or not, he couldn't help feeling he was somehow to blame for Loki's emotional deadness.

oOo

I wonder where Steve went, Natasha mused, watching dwarves go about their business from her perch on a street bench. Somehow, her favorite part of this city were the big beasts of burden a dwarf had told her were called mole oxen. The creatures could dig, and they were big enough to pull huge carts. They were cute.

Finishing the last bite of the meat bun a female dwarf had given her, Natasha got to her feet. She was just considering going and finding her wayward lover when a flash of green smoke caught her eye. She turned just in time to see Loki materialize. For once, making an entrance obviously wasn't his plan, and Natasha was the only one who noticed. Glad of a chance to talk to him alone, she quickly trotted over to him.

He saw her and waited for her to catch up. "Miss Romanova," he greeted her.

At first glance he seemed fine, but his voice sounded a little strained. And there were still almost-invisible signs of exhaustion about him. "Loki. How are you feeling?"

His smile held hints of irritation. "All this concern for my welfare."

"It's hard for us not to care enough to be concerned," she told him, "given that you've saved our lives how many times?"

He started walking, inclining his head to indicate she was welcome to join. "Saved you from dangers I brought upon you in the first place," he pointed out.

"We came of our own free will," she said, feeling this was important. "You didn't force us. And frankly, we didn't do this for you, remember? We agreed to protect Earth."

"Yes, that is true," Loki mused, seeming to relax a little.

Well, she already knew he liked her. Strangely enough, the feeling was mutual. "All I'm saying," she said, "was that you didn't have to nearly kill yourself to save us. But you did. I never forget my debts."

Green eyes met grey-blue. His smile this time was more genuine. "We have quite a bit in common, Miss Romanova."

"You can call me Natasha, you know," she said.

"Of course I can," he said, raising an eloquent eyebrow.

In spite of herself, she felt a rush of girlish pleasure, the implications of that not lost on her. "Anyway," she said, clearing her throat a little, "I just wanted to tell you how grateful I am."

"For bringing you along on such a life-threatening mission?"

She lightly punched his arm. "For saving my life when it would have been easier to let me die."

The contact seemed to surprise him a little. Well, it kind of surprised her, actually. Here she was treating him like a big brother or something. Carefree, friendly interaction.

"Then you are welcome," he said. "My motives weren't entirely unselfish, you know. I made a bargain with Thor I would join the Avengers. I am obligated to do all I can for you."

She snorted. "You're really bad at accepting gratitude, aren't you?"

Was it her imagination, or did he look a *teeny* bit uncomfortable? "I am perhaps unaccustomed to receiving it with no conditions attached," he admitted after a slight pause.

"Well, get used to it," she said, "because you have it. Because of you, I feel like I can go on making amends." With that, she quickly wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. "You're one of us, Loki." She felt him stiffen and let go before he had the chance to react.

Then she walked away.

oOo

Walking around cities in other realms qualified as the strangest experience of Steve's life, up to and including waking up in the twenty-first century. It just wasn't something a person expected to do. He could remember a time when he thought Earth was . . . well, it. Everything. And here he was walking around in another world called Nidavellir with dwarves.

Pausing in his run, he looked around and saw Loki. Adjusting his path, he jogged across to him. "Loki," he said when the Aesir met his gaze.

Loki seemed to tense minutely. "Captain," he said in a neutral tone. "Enjoying the sights?"

"More or less," Steve said. "How are you doing? You still look tired."

"I'm fine. Have you spoken with Thor?"

"Yeah," Steve replied, "and he said you wanted to leave tomorrow morning, but -"

"Good," Loki cut him off, turning as if to go.

"Wait," Steve said, grabbing his arm. "Look, there's something I've been wanting to say for a while now. You really saved us back there, at a pretty high cost to yourself -"

"I did what any of you would have done," Loki interrupted again, sounding waspish.

"That's the thing," Steve pressed on, squeezing the slim arm in his hand for emphasis. " *You* did. At one point, we were enemies. And yet you saved us."

Loki turned to face him finally, resignation written all over his face. "I never once considered any of you enemies. With the possible exception of Thor. You were simply a means to an end. These confessions of gratitude are growing a little tiresome."

Steve's eyebrows climbed toward his hairline. "Why? We owe you. It's only natural we would feel grateful. I think you've proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that you're one of us, and that means a *lot* to humans, Loki. Maybe we just feel stronger about things because we live shorter lives, but fact is we care about you. All of us."

Loki looked at him, face completely blank. Devoid of any emotion or clue as to what he was thinking or feeling. He reached up and covered Steve's hand with his own cold one, gently pushing it away. "You owe me nothing, Captain. None of you do."

He walked away, and Steve watched him in surprise. *When he touched me, his hand was trembling.*

oOo

Loki stormed into the room Brokkr always reserved for him and all but kicked the door shut behind him. If he'd known the Avengers were such an overly-emotional lot, he would have left them all behind and just come alone. *I don't need this. Sentiment is weakness. It is nothing but a distraction.*

He'd expected it from Thor. He hadn't expected it from the humans. But it seemed their grudges were even shorter-lived than their lives. Throwing himself down on the bed, he covered his face

with his hands and tried to focus on breathing and nothing else. With no voices clamoring for attention in his head, other things were cluttering it up. Things dangerous in their own way. Experience had taught Loki nothing good ever came of letting people close.

There was no benefit in opening oneself up to affection, either giving or receiving. It robbed men of their better sense, of their ability to reason, and their clarity. Anger welled up in Loki's breast.

Why would you love me, you great idiot? We have a comfortable rapport, the sex feels good, and I'm certain we will fight well together when the time comes. Why do you need to complicate the matter by falling in love? What about me even inspired such idiocy in you? He knew he'd never once encouraged Stark's feelings.

Done just the opposite, in fact.

In all his years, Loki had never known *anyone* so infuriating! Even the fact that he managed to rile Loki to this state was infuriating.

The door banged open. He lurched upright, eyes blazing with anger to find the cause of his turmoil barging in and slamming the door (and locking it, too) like he owned the place. Loki got to his feet and drew himself up to his full height.

"Your gall knows no bounds," he hissed.

"It seems to be the only way to get your attention," Stark said, sounding just as angry as Loki felt. "What the hell is wrong with you, you damn frozen bastard?"

He sounded hurt. Ridiculously hurt. Loki tilted his chin up. "You knew full well when you started this I would never love you, Stark. Getting wounded now is a little after the fact."

"Fuck you," Stark snarled, looking like he was contemplating hitting Loki. "You know as well as I do we're way past that now. You wouldn't have let me fuck you over and over like you did if you were just looking for sex. You would have tied me down with your damn magic like you always do and took what you wanted. But you gave me what *I* wanted. No way would you do that if you didn't trust me and have feelings for me, goddamn asshole."

Loki gave him a cold smile. "Sentiment."

Stark reached out and shoved Loki down to sit on the bed. He leaned over him, and Loki was surprised to feel the human had grown quite stronger.

"My feelings for you don't make me *weak*," he growled, "they make me *stronger*."

"You have no feelings for me," Loki said, still calm. "You are simply confused because I saved your life. This infatuation will pass. I will not indulge it 'til then."

"The only one who's confused is you," Stark retorted, eyes flaring with heat.

Quicker than a striking snake, Loki flipped them and pinned Stark to the bed by a hand around his throat. "And what about me do you love, fool human? How could you *possibly* love me? I tried to kill you. I tried to destroy everything you cherish!" He eased his hold just enough Stark could answer.

Those dark brown eyes held no doubt, the man's gaze never wavered, and his voice held nothing but utter surety. "I love *everything* about you. All your insecurities, all your complications, all your beauty, all your power, all your confidence, all your razor wit, and every inch of your fucking sexy

body. There isn't a *single thing* I don't love about you!"

Something very like pain blossomed in Loki's heart. Hot, sharp, sudden. His hand went lax.

It was Stark's turn to strike. His hand clamped tightly around the back of Loki's neck, dragging him down to fuse their mouths together. Loki felt like he was melting down into Stark, muscles incapable of protesting as the man devoured him from the inside out. He couldn't even breathe until Stark backed off the tiniest bit to suck in a quick breath.

"You're an idiot," Loki gasped. Why wasn't he trying to pull away? "Such an idiot."

"Complete idiot," Stark agreed between biting, stinging kisses. "But so are you."

Loki started laughing. He just couldn't help it. This was all so absurd. Stark rolled them over, and Loki allowed it, the anger and turmoil inexplicably gone. He reached up and smoothed the fingers of one hand through Stark's hair.

"What is wrong with you, Anthony? Anyone with an iota of sense would have run by now."

Stark shook his head, and Loki had never seen anyone look at him with such naked emotion. "Too late for that. I've already got you under my skin."

The mirth mellowed into contentment, and Loki didn't stop stroking Stark's hair. "Why would you love me? Surely you know I'll be the death of you."

"Know it," Stark confirmed, "and am just nuts enough not to care."

"You are, at that," Loki murmured, fingers tangling in the hair at the base of Stark's neck and tugging downward. "You are that."

This time, their mouths met with gentle persuasion. This time, Loki knew when the crumbled walls reformed, Tony would be inside them. Likely, he was there to stay.

Thirty-Ninth Installment

Thirty Ninth Installment: Half the Battle

Thor and the good captain came around in the early evening, just after Loki returned from helping Brokkr and Sindri with some final repairs to Stark's suit of armor. He could tell immediately they had something to say, and he wondered how much more he would be expected to take today.

"Loki, we've been talking," Rogers said, his expression gentle, "and we decided we're not leaving the city until you've rested."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "You decided this."

"We did," the captain said. "All of us. You've been doing the work of ten men the last weeks, and we can't seem to convince you to slow down. So none of us are going anywhere until you've spent at least three days doing nothing but sitting around and eating and recovering."

How much more could he take before he snapped and killed them all? He gave Thor a frigid glare. "And you support this?"

"Fully," Thor said. "I will bind you with anti-magic shackles if I must, to ensure you can't escape."

A rather empty bluff, but the Avengers refusing to leave was a means of binding him just as effectively. He glared at the two men, fury mounting yet again. Then, as abruptly as it flared, it fizzled and died. What was the point?

"Fine," he said, "you'll have your way." He supposed a few days of meditation would be good for him. Though the voices were gone and his connection to Yggdrasil seemed to have been severed, he wasn't quite his normal self yet. He could feel it in the way his body still strained to channel seiðr.

"If," he added when they both looked pleasantly surprised he'd yielded, "you'll all agree to leave me alone."

"Agreed," Thor said before Rogers could speak. "Would you like anything? Books?"

"No," Loki said. "Sindri and Brokkr have both given me a gift, priceless ancient tomes on various lost magic artifacts, among other things."

Thor nodded. "As long as we can interrupt you now and then to eat."

"Yes, dear brother," Loki said. "I would say I wish you both to sleep well, but I would be lying." Without waiting for another word, he transformed himself into a crow and took to the skies.

The dwarven city rested right up against the mountains, and the peaks were covered with dense forests and swift rivers. Many streams branched off the rivers, and Loki knew of several beautiful places far from prying eyes. He flew to one such and perched on a tree branch, watching the sun slowly dip below the horizon. The bright oranges and pinks of dusk mellowed to purples and blues of twilight, and eventually the soft black of night.

Loki flew off his branch to a rocky outcropping surrounded by trees where a stream plummeted over the edge of several large stones. It formed a waterfall only a few hand-spans higher than Loki's head, cascading into a small pool before winding its way onward down the mountain.

Materializing naked beside the pool, Loki strode in without hesitation. As ever, the cold didn't even register to his skin.

Though it did turn it blue. That was only something Loki had recently allowed. Assuming his long hidden Jötunn form. It didn't feel natural, and Loki stepped right under the fall of water. The cold almost felt warm against the skin of a frost giant, for it was nowhere near as cold the frozen temperatures of Jötunheimr. Closing his eyes, he tilted his face back and tried to remember what it was like to have no attachments to anyone.

I don't know what I expected. That the Avengers would come to trust and respect me but not love me? Perhaps that was a shortsighted and unrealistic notion. Of course, it was entirely possible with the Aesir. Or anyone else in the Nine, it seemed, but those damnable humans. Why did they have to feel everything so much more strongly than any of the other races?

Loki was no stranger to being loved. The dwarves here loved him. There were several villages in Vanaheim and Alfheim full of people who loved Loki and felt they owed him a great deal. So why was it different with these humans?

I gave them nothing to encourage these feelings. With others, I have always had an objective. I have always wanted something. It was beneficial to me to nurture feelings of affection. With these humans . . . It had just happened.

And Stark.

A complete aberration.

I have been desperately hated, openly mocked, feared, scorned, shunned. I have been obsessed over, blindly adored, wanted, needed, and used. No one who has ever known me, truly known me, has simply . . . loved me. For no reason, with no condition, not as an obligation, or as some result of my actions. Not even Thor has simply loved me.

At least, not until recently.

This entire mission was having completely unintended and unforeseen consequences.

And Loki was exhausted. To the marrow of his bones, he was exhausted. Grudgingly, he conceded that his brother and the meddling captain were right. He needed to rest. Closing his eyes, he willed all thought away and focused on the sensation of water pouring over his skin.

Presently, he moved out of the pool. A slight shimmer, and he was dry and dressed in jeans and a sweater of a material Stark called cashmere. It was delightfully soft against his skin, he would say that for it. Not exactly practical, but at the moment he would rather feel that against his skin than leather.

Barefoot, he padded through the forest. This was quite a beautiful spot in Nidavellir, truly. Up here in the mountains there were larger predators than at the base, but no wild animal had ever even threatened Loki since he'd mastered one of his mother's skills: charming. Charming animals was easier than breathing, and as long as he didn't threaten them they would even allow him to touch them.

Of course, Loki had taken her skill one step further. He could do more than charm them so they'd leave him alone. He could also often convince them to help him.

Transforming himself now into a large black wildcat, he leaped nimbly into the branches of a thick, old tree. In the dark, he all but disappeared as he laid down and closed his eyes.

Moments later, he was in his dreamscape.

oOo

Dying, as it turned out, wasn't quite what Frigga had expected. The queen of Asgard, once known as the Jewel of Alfheim, certainly had never expected to die quite so young. And definitely so unready to let go. Odin and Thor were both all right, and she had no regrets concerning either of them. Despite some challenges, they were strong and secure in themselves.

Loki, however, was fractured almost all the way through.

He reminded her of a tragically beautiful pane of stained glass that was littered with spider web cracks. Only a little more pressure would cause it to shatter. Her precious youngest had come perilously close to that breaking point too many times to count. He was strong enough to have held on through the worst of his life, but she truly did not know how much more he could take.

It was why she'd made her bargain with Hel.

She could not leave her youngest son.

He needed at least one person he *knew* loved him without condition, even if she was not the only one who actually did. And until he no longer needed her, she would hover in this not-place, stuck between living and dying, unmoving. To her, it was no price at all if it meant she could stay with Loki.

The borders of his dreamscape shimmered, which meant he had just entered it. She drifted toward the disturbance, knowing he would come find her if he wanted to see her. He didn't always, and she didn't take it personally. He was a complicated lad who very much wanted to do everything himself, shoulder all his own burdens, and take on the burdens of others.

For someone who believed himself unworthy in most aspects, he was among the most unselfish individuals she'd ever known.

Moments later, there he was. Frigga always used these first few seconds with him to study how he seemed. Because he was seldom on his guard around her, he didn't always remember to come with a glamor on his form. The change was probably small to someone who didn't know him as well as she knew him, but to her it was ghastly.

Thin. Shadowed eyes. Hunched shoulders. He had the look of someone but a few breaths from collapsing. Careful not to draw attention to it right away, she broke into a smile and immediately folded him into a tight embrace. Yes, she could feel his ribs a little too sharply. And even worse, as he laid his head on her shoulder, he was trembling. Very, very slightly.

She kissed his cheek and cupped his face to make him look down at her. "Loki," she murmured, "look at you. What has happened to put you in such a state?"

He blinked, and then he suddenly looked normal. But the damage had already been done, and he knew it. Even so, he smiled and gave her the usual answer. "I'm fine, Mother." He turned to grow a small bench in the forest glen of his dreamscape.

Sighing so he wouldn't hear, Frigga shook her head and sat beside him. "So tell me what you've been up to," she said, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him to her breast. He obediently laid his head on her shoulder and melted against her.

"I have arranged for Hel to acquire the Casket of Ancient Winters," Loki said. "Once it is in her

possession, she will release you from your bargain with her, and return you to Asgard. Alive."

Frigga didn't smother her sigh this time, pressing her lips to his forehead. "I do not like you assuming my debts, dearest."

"It's already done," he said, not even trying to hide his exhaustion from her any longer. "And if you're worried about me being indebted to Hel, I won't be. She and I have an understanding."

Frigga laughed softly. "Isn't the Casket in Asgard?"

"Yes, protected by the Tesseract," Loki confirmed. "I arranged for the Tesseract to be gone so she could take it."

No longer capable of being surprised by anything her son did, Frigga just chuckled. "Always busy, my darling." The silence that fell wasn't uncomfortable. "Do you know what she plans to do with the Caskets?" She didn't expect him to answer.

"Yes," Loki replied. Then he sighed. "It's complicated, and I can't really explain, but what she wants aligns with what I want. It's why we struck our bargain."

Cryptic and mysterious as always, but Frigga didn't mind. If Loki could tell her he would, so secrecy likely had been part of his bargain with the lady of Helheim. She changed the subject to something she'd rather talk about, anyway.

"What about this young man of yours?"

Loki stiffened, which made Frigga smile. "What about him?"

"Tell me about him. He seems very intelligent, which is good. You need someone on a level with you so they aren't left far, far behind."

"He's intelligent . . . for a human," Loki muttered.

Sounding a bit petulant. Frigga's smile deepened. "And he is very stubborn, it seems?"

"To absurd degrees," Loki confirmed.

"Which is also good, because I watched you trying to drive him away. I see it didn't work."

Her son made a grumbling noise. "He is a fool."

"Why?" Frigga challenged. "Because he loves you?"

"Yes."

"Why does that make him foolish?" she demanded. "You are absolutely worthy of love, dearest. Hide it away though you may try, I see right through your façade of darkness."

"It is not a façade, Mother," he said, sounding tired.

Not for the first time, Frigga wished she'd been beside her husband on the rainbow bridge that fateful day Loki had fallen. Rather, let go. She never, *ever* would have let him. It wasn't always easy to spare Odin her anger, for he'd never really understood Loki, and that made being a father difficult for him. Unfortunately, Loki was more than observant enough to pick up on it.

Knowing her youngest wouldn't appreciate it, she didn't dwell on it. "As soon as I have returned to

the realm of the living, bring this young man of yours to Asgard so I may meet him."

"He's a human, Mother."

"And that somehow matters? We love whom we love, my darling. After all, I fell in love with an Aesir, and I am a Light Elf."

"I don't love Tony Stark."

A statement which Frigga didn't acknowledge. "But he loves you, and for that I will always be grateful to him."

He took several slow breaths. "I just can't win against you."

She kissed his forehead. "No, you cannot. Now rest, my darling. You are absolutely exhausted."

Though she couldn't see his face, she knew he was smiling.

Fortieth Installment

Sap ahead.

Fortieth Installment: Quiet Moments

Tony woke with a start, not sure what had jarred him out of sleep. It was pitch black outside, and the wide-open window allowed in quite a nice breeze. He could smell some sort of flower he didn't recognize, and then he blinked. *I didn't go to bed with the window open.* His eyes narrowed a little, and then he nearly had a heart attack.

There was a large black wildcat lounging on the wide sill.

Yep, just chillin' there.

Nearly invisible except that its black fur was a little darker than the star-studded sky.

Don't move, Stark. Maybe if you don't move, it won't notice you. He was suddenly ridiculously grateful that the Arc reactor was gone, because surely the cat would have seen the glow and attacked him by now.

Then the creature turned its head, and Tony about swallowed his tongue. It had *glowing* eyes. Wait. Glowing *green* eyes. Tony's heart skipped a beat.

"Um, Loki?"

The black wildcat blinked, then it jumped down into the room and padded toward him with purpose. Tony tried not to move suddenly, seriously hoping his instincts were right. Then it was gone, and there was Loki, a hint of mischief in his eyes.

"Whatever is the matter, Stark?" he all but purred. "You look positively terrified."

"You try being awakened in the middle of the night by a huge black wildcat," Tony grumbled, automatically reaching up for Loki and yanking him down onto the bed.

Surprisingly, the god allowed it and folded down next to Tony. Without any directing, he laid his head on Tony's shoulder. "I haven't been attacked by a wild animal in centuries," he said primly, "so I would have nothing to fear."

Feeling practically giddy that Loki was curling up with him, Tony snorted. "Of course. Smug bastard. Is there anything you can't do?"

"Just one thing, it seems," Loki murmured, smoothing his hand over Tony's chest where the Arc reactor used to be.

"And that is?" Tony prompted when the other didn't continue.

This time, Loki didn't reply.

Tony sighed and decided he didn't care. Besides, he thought with a tiny smirk, he had a feeling he knew what the god would have said. "Feel like a romp in the sheets?" he asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"No."

Ah, well. *Worth a shot.* He wrapped his arms around Loki's thin shoulders and pulled him fully into his arms. There was nothing disappointing about snuggling. This was a tremendous personal victory, and Tony wouldn't let it go to waste. *He came to me. He came to me for this. Just to be with me.*

In its way, that was even better than sex, because during sex Loki was completely in control. This was admitting to a craving for simple contact, something that couldn't really be forced.

Oh yeah. This was just as good as sex.

"I love you," he said, because it needed to be said intentionally and not as a thoughtless accident.

No response. Then he realized he could feel Loki shaking a little, and he nearly had a panic attack. Then he heard what sounded like a faint snort.

"Are you *laughing*?"

Loki stopped trying to keep it in. "I can't help it. You keep constantly reminding me what a fool you are. And instead of putting you down as I should, I can't help but find it endearing."

That soft, genuine laugh sent a bolt of warmth through Tony's chest. "That's what I'm good for. But the proper response is, *I love you too, Tony. More than the air I breathe, and definitely more than my favorite white-chocolate tiramisu I frequently enjoy for dessert.*"

The laugh tapered off, but Tony sensed Loki's mood was still content. "Is it? Being your lover is far too troublesome."

And yep, the last bit of Tony that didn't love Loki died. *Lover. He called me his lover.* He tried not to react like anything special had just happened. Loki might get all skittish on him and run off. He definitely wanted to wake up with the god in his arms. He let the silence fall complete, not resisting the urge to bury his nose in Loki's ebony hair.

Maybe his *lover* would be feeling frisky in the morning.

ooo

A near-oppressive heat slowly (but pleasantly) drove Loki awake. Verdant eyes fluttered open, and the bright source of the heat made itself known immediately. Full sun streamed in through the open window, falling in thick bars across his body and the bed. It was such that he felt he was melting into the comfortable surface.

A hand slid across his belly, slipping beneath his shirt to settle on bare skin. Too peaceful to even be startled by the unexpected touch, Loki smiled and covered the hand with one of his own. It wasn't as if there were a great many people who would be in bed with him to touch.

"Good morning, Stark."

"Tony," came the quick correction.

Loki smiled again and didn't reply, wondering if he would just fall back to sleep. He couldn't remember ever waking up so long past dawn, let alone contemplating not rising at once.

"God you're gorgeous," Stark abruptly murmured.

Idly, Loki turned his head to look at the man. Stark was leaning up on one elbow, chin in his hand, gazing down at Loki. No uncertainty, no hint of judgment, no hidden fear. Just open admiration and . . .

Love. Yes, that was love. Love as strong as he'd seen in the eyes of Thor and his mother, just a slightly different color. Intense and passionate in all different ways.

And somehow, this time it wasn't as totally unwanted as before. Allowing his eyes to fall shut again, Loki couldn't quite stop the faint smile. Content. Peaceful.

Happy.

"I haven't eaten in at least two days," he told his companion. "Since I've been instructed I'm not allowed to do anything but rest, find us something to eat, would you?"

He didn't need to look at Stark to feel the man glowing with happiness. It took Loki a moment to realize exactly why: *I said us. Not me. I unconsciously included him. Oh, Stark. Perhaps you will be the death of me, not the other way around.*

"Anything for you, princess," Stark purred. "Any druthers before I, your faithful and loving slave, go running off to bring you breakfast in bed?"

Loki snorted softly. "No. But if you bring me something unpalatable, I will castrate you."

"Damn you're an extreme bastard!" Stark exclaimed with a chuckle.

Loki grunted when a mouth ever-so-rudely landed on his and demanded a deep and somewhat messy kiss.

"All right, you stay right where you are," Stark said, clambering out of the bed and jostling Loki. "I'll be back soon."

"Take your time," Loki murmured, already drifting off with a smile still affixed to his lips.

oOo

Thor was sure he'd searched the entire great hall from top to bottom twice when he started to panic. He could not find Loki anywhere. *Surely he wouldn't leave on his own? Not after promising me he would rest?* Just to be sure, he searched everywhere he could think of one last time before going back to the kitchens.

Clint, Natasha, and Steve were all there, enjoying what looked like the famous meat buns the dwarves excelled at making. Thor strode to them.

"Have any of you seen Loki?" he asked, making sure he didn't sound like a panicking big brother.

Steve frowned. "Not since yesterday. He's not in his room?"

"No," Thor said.

Natasha gave him a crooked grin. "He's probably hiding so he doesn't have to hear any more sap from us. We did unload a lot yesterday."

Clint snorted.

The door opened, and Tony strolled in. It was such a different posture from the last time Thor had

seen him the god did a double-take. Gone was the pent-up frustration, the burning anger, the hurt, the resentment. This was a man completely relaxed, perfectly happy and . . .

"Have *you* seen Loki?" Natasha asked abruptly, and her grey-blue eyes glittered with amusement.

"Matter of fact, I have," Tony confirmed. "He's in my room, waiting for me to bring us breakfast. Got any tips on his favorite things, buddy?" He looked at Thor.

Who raised an eyebrow. Someone else's bedroom was the one place Thor had not thought to look.

"Did you get lucky or something?" Natasha asked with a wide grin.

Tony raised an eyebrow at her. "As if I would kiss and tell. But Loki was in my bed pretty much all night."

Thor felt the urge to roll his eyes. As if Stark *wouldn't* kiss and tell. It still wasn't easy, to hear him speak of Loki in such a lewd manner. It was difficult to imagine his brother being okay with it, either.

"Loki is supposed to be *resting*," Steve said.

"Hey, that's all he did," Tony said with a wounded look. "He kept his word. I even asked if he wanted to break it a little, and he refused."

"Stark -" Thor began a warning.

"Oh, let him have fun," Natasha interrupted. "He's been panting and chasing after Loki like a lovesick puppy for so long now it's disgusting. Let him boast a little."

"I dunno how that sounded in your head," Stark said, giving her a glare, "but you managed to insult me three times in one sentence."

Thor felt his lips curl up without permission. Clint and Steve looked dangerously close to laughter.

Natasha tossed her rich, red hair. "I've been observing Loki pretty closely. Guy might be totally nuts, but damn does he know how to deliver a mean insult."

"Because that's so important for an ex-assassin to know," Tony muttered.

Thor allowed the smile, this time. "I know what Loki likes," he said, beckoning Stark to follow.

oOo

Tony trotted back to his assigned bedroom with a tray laden with an assortment of foods both he and Loki should be able to enjoy. Outside, he slowed and eased the door open just in case Loki had fallen back to sleep. He crept inside as quietly as he could and eased it shut again, carefully throwing the lock.

Then he froze and just stared in total and complete awe.

Yes, Loki was still asleep. He'd climbed into bed with Tony last night wearing very soft black pants (yoga pants, maybe?) and a thin green shirt. The shirt was gone, and so were the pants, replaced with a dark green robe of perhaps linen. Or satin. Tony suspected Loki had gotten hot. With the sun shining directly into the room, the temperature was quite high.

Though it was belted at the waist, the shimmery material had fallen open at the thigh, exposing

enough of his ivory legs Tony almost started drooling. It was also open at the neck and chest, making the god look like an all-you-can-eat buffet. He wanted to bite all over that perfect skin.

Loki looked oddly vulnerable, with one arm thrown up over his head and ebony hair clinging to his face and neck. He was just so unbelievably beautiful, and Tony couldn't quite wrap his brain around all this, just yet. *I made him accept my feelings for him. Maybe I even got him to accept his for me. None of our friends seem to care we're together, no matter how crazy and insane this is.*

Dare I think it? He's mine. Loki is mine.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to Loki's forehead, a little surprised at how warm his skin was. "Wake up, gorgeous," he whispered. "Breakfast in bed, just like I promised."

Eyes of the most arresting emerald drifted open, everything about Loki speaking of lazy contentment. "You took so long I fell back to sleep," he said, tilting his head back to bring their mouths into alignment. Just as Tony was ready to die from happiness at being kissed, Loki pulled away and denied him real contact as he sat up.

Tony just smiled and climbed onto the bed with him. "All your favorites, right?"

Loki lifted the lid from the tray and inspected the contents. He gave Tony a little smile. "You asked Thor for help, didn't you?"

"How the hell did you know that?"

"Because there are things on this tray only he would know are my favorites. Still," he set the lid aside, "I didn't say you couldn't ask for outside help."

Tony watched him bite into a dark red fruit that looked like a plum but had the crispness of an apple. And swallowed a completely inappropriate reaction. "So I don't have to learn to live without my manhood?"

"Not this time," Loki said, taking another bite of the fruit and watching Tony with a knowing gleam in his amazing eyes.

Yeah, he totally knows what that's doing to me. He cleared his throat and grabbed a sweet roll. He definitely did not dwell on how the juice had stained Loki's lips. Or how amazing it would be to lean over and lick it off. For now, at least, it was probably safest to let Loki set the pace.

And if it meant Tony spent the rest of his life desperately uncomfortable . . . well. *Fuck I don't care. Loki is MINE.*

oOo

Though Frigga didn't like her youngest assuming her debts, she did have to admit she was looking forward to being alive again. It had given her no small measure of amusement, wondering how that would all play out. As far as she knew, Loki hadn't told anyone about his bargain, that he was working on bringing her back.

I suppose if I just strolled back into Asgard one day, I would send my poor husband into permanent Odinsleep. It was irreverent to giggle about such a thing.

Somewhere, a presence caused a ripple over the surface of Loki's dreamscape. Since she was the one who made sure Loki learned this skill, she knew very well what that meant. Someone was dreaming very strongly of her son. Someone who loved him. Thor knew how to dreamwalk, so it

couldn't be him. That left one possibility, one that drew Frigga's curiosity. She drifted toward it, hoping it would be . . .

She opened the dreamscape "ceiling", and in he fell. To her surprise, he didn't crash down. He actually managed to land semi-gracefully, which told her it wasn't the first time this had happened. Well, that was all sorts of interesting. Loki didn't invite people here lightly. She smiled and studied her son's young man.

He was broad-shouldered but lean, telling of strength. His hair and eyes were both dark brown, facial hair arranged in an attractive goatee. Not common among the Aesir, but appealing on him. There was an ageless quality to his face that told her something else interesting.

Loki had imbued him with restorative magic. That meant this human's lifespan had been tremendously lengthened.

"You must be Anthony Stark?" she said striding toward him and holding out a hand.

He took it with only a slight hesitation. Then he gave her a crooked grin. "You must be their mom. Thor looks like you."

Her eyebrows climbed. "You do not seem surprised."

"Nah. Loki told me he still communes with you."

"Did he?" Frigga mused with a gentle smile. "Do you know he didn't even tell Thor? You are very special to him."

Tony broke into a grin she would describe as self-satisfied. "Yep, I know. Took me quite a long time to get him to see that."

Frigga made a bench appear in the wildly-colored forest. Sitting, she patted the space next to her. "Tell me about yourself, Anthony."

He began a long, surprisingly heartbreaking story. She was a little surprised at his honesty, sparing no ugly detail. A weapons dealer, captured and tortured, his unlikely escape, and the way it changed him. She watched his face as he spoke, and though it wasn't overt she could still see the effects of his ordeal in his eyes.

"I have to say," he said after he finished, "even all of that hasn't felt as strange as these last several weeks. Humans don't go through their lives thinking they will visit other worlds. Let alone fall in love with aliens."

That last, rueful.

Frigga smiled. "I'm glad you did. Loki has always been a complicated boy. He needs someone to show him it doesn't *have* to be complicated. Love is actually quite simple."

Tony barked a laugh. "It hasn't been simple for me! Jeez, I think getting Loki to thaw was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"And you did it beautifully," Frigga said, a twinkle in her eye. "I have never been so grateful for a person's stubbornness."

He gave her a charmingly crooked grin. "I wanted to give up once or twice, but I guess I hung in there just long enough."

"What made you?" she asked, curious.

He shrugged. "Dunno. Kept thinking how amazing we'd be together."

Frigga smiled, feeling more and more sure this young man was right for her son. "Would you like to know his weakness?"

Tony faced her, eyes glittering. "I'd love to."

She chuckled. "Tenderness. It works wonders. Loki can resist force, anger, cruelty, and spite. He has always melted before tenderness. I suppose that is why he is completely open and vulnerable with me." Reaching over, she squeezed Tony's hand. "He will be the same with you, trust me."

Perhaps, she thought with a pang, it was because he'd received so little tenderness in his life he didn't know how to resist it.

Tony appeared to mull that over. "I see. Hm."

A flicker warned Frigga her son had entered his own dreamscape. Grasping Tony's hand again, she pulled him up. "Loki's here. You better go. Something tells me he would not appreciate his mother and lover conspiring against him." She winked.

He gave her a cheeky grin in return. "Don't worry, Mom. Loki's already pretty defenseless with me."

Laughing, she guided him out of the dreamscape. Yes, he was the one.

Forty-First Installment

Forty-First Installment: Introspection

After three days, Loki looked so much better Thor almost couldn't believe his eyes. During that time Loki had been a complete recluse, vanishing so that not even Tony knew where he went. Apparently, wherever he went he'd kept his word about resting. That pinched, gaunt look about his pale face was gone, his eyes were bright, and he didn't look exhausted unto death.

He carried himself with the usual tilt to his chin, shoulders back and straight. It was strangely good to see.

He strode into the great hall as if he ruled it, and the two dwarf brothers Sindri and Brokk immediately leaped to their feet. They'd been questioning Tony about his Arc reactor, trying to come up with more applications for the little device. As soon as Loki appeared they seemed to forget about the human, and it was almost comical how fast they rushed to him.

"Loki!" exclaimed Sindri.

"Your armor is long complete, as promised," Brokk said.

Loki gave them both indulgent smiles, and even though they were taller than him he appeared to look down at them. It was something he'd mastered. "I know, Brokk. Before we go, I would like to make sure Stark understands all the new functions. Particularly how to don it. I was very impressed by your ingenuity, coming up with that little feature."

The two dwarves all but glowed at the praise.

"But you made it possible, Loki," Sindri said. "We could never have done it without you."

"An accident of your birth," Loki dismissed his part. "Assign credit where it is due."

This, Thor thought ruefully, is how Loki got that nickname, Silvertongue. So sweetly do words pour off his tongue, a honeyed flow to dull even the sharpest edge of reality.

The two dwarves looked at him in complete adoration.

Brokk went to Tony, who had been watching Loki in obvious contemplation. He blinked and focused on the dwarf, who handed Tony what looked like a flat locket as big around as the man's palm. Looking mystified, Tony accepted it. Brokk gestured.

"Put it around your neck," he instructed.

Tony obeyed. The chain was long enough to drape over his head.

"Now open it," Sindri commanded.

Tony opened it, and just like that he was wearing his armor.

Thor blinked. *Well, that certainly is more proficient than the old way.*

"Shit!" Tony exclaimed. "I thought Jarvis did a good job of putting this on fast. But where's the helmet? And you didn't mess with the computer core, did you?"

"No," Brokkkr replied, sounding offended. "Loki was very specific on what we couldn't touch."

"And he doesn't make mistakes," Sindri added.

Thor closed his eyes a moment, smiling to himself.

"Look at the inside of the locket," Brokkkr said.

"Simply opening the locket triggers the process of donning the armor," Sindri went on. "The buttons within perform two different commands. The green one will bring out the helmet. The red one will remove the armor. You must be wearing the locket, of course, for it to work."

"It is also magically coded to you, Stark," Loki added in an almost gentle tone. "No one else can use it."

The look Tony gave Loki was all kinds of loving, worse than the two dwarves combined. He smiled. "You always think of everything."

"Yes," Loki said, now turning away from Tony in total dismissal.

Not appreciating overt displays of affection, Thor noted with a tiny grin. Good to know his brother hadn't changed to any absurd degree.

The god of mischief gave the two dwarves a rare smile. "As always, you have more than delivered. Here is the promised token of my gratitude." He held up his palm, and a vial filled with green light appeared.

Seiðr. Quite a generous amount of it, too. The dwarves would be able to craft many a piece out of sky iron with that. Thor managed not to show any surprise. *He will reap many rewards for his generosity, no doubt.* If the looks the two dwarves gave Loki was anything to go by, they were pretty much loyal for life. Thor found it unexpectedly comforting.

Brokkkr cupped his hands around the vial and Loki's hand, lifting it to his lips and bowing over it. "Thank you, Loki," he murmured with heartfelt gratitude. "No mage has ever been kinder to our people."

Or treated you with such a lack of scorn, Thor noted with a pang of guilt. The Aesir had never once acknowledged the dwarves as equals. Their inability to use magic made them lesser. Just like the dark elves. No wonder they adored Loki.

Loki cupped Brokkkr's chin in his elegant hand, making him lift his head. "Hold your head high, my friend. You have no reason to show deference. Not even to me."

Thor wondered if it was even possible for the dwarf to display more zealous love. *If Loki commanded, these people would go to war for him.* It was a frightening thought, one Thor ruthlessly quashed.

"Where will you go, now?" Brokkkr asked, stepping back beside his brother.

"Continuing my search for Æsa," Loki replied. "You will remember your promise to me?"

"She will never receive safe harbor from the dwarves," Sindri piped up, eyes blazing. "We have sent out runners. If she ever shows her worthless face, you will know instantly."

I wonder if she is even an enemy of the dwarves, or if they have turned against her because Loki

wished it?

Loki smiled, and some of the darkness Thor had grown accustomed to seeing glimmered in his eyes. "You are loyal friends. I will never forget everything you have done for me."

"Nor we what you have done for us," Sindri intoned.

Loki looked up at Thor. "Shall we, brother?"

Thor gestured toward the tall, double doors. "Whenever you're ready."

oOo

Though initially it had irritated Loki, he was grateful to his fool brother's insistence that he rest. Finally, for the first time in far too long, he felt at full strength. Not hovering somewhere between exhaustion and collapse. As the Avengers left the city behind them, Loki began the process of extending himself to locate the shadow witch.

Almost as an afterthought, he looked up at Thor. "We will have to travel through shadow again. Soon."

Thor nodded, but the human Avengers all looked unhappy about that. No less happy than Loki, honestly. He didn't prefer that method of travel, either. When by himself, he could simply become like the shadow and slip through it unnoticed and unhindered. Taking non-magic-using humans and Thor was bothersome. Cumbersome. And downright dangerous.

But there was no other way.

As Loki sank further into the magical energies of Nidavellir, he abruptly felt himself trying not to smile. He could feel Stark, walking close at his back, radiating a great deal of emotional energy. Specifically, warm and sentimental, sappy love. Directed right at Loki.

It was annoying. It was gratifying. It was distracting. It was comforting. It was irritating. It was so Stark. *If you're going to send that at me, fool, I'm going to use it.* Gently, even though Stark would have no idea what was happening, he extended his senses to include life energy and started drawing Stark's energy into himself.

He smiled inwardly. *He is well and truly lost. How in the Nine did you come to love me so much, Stark? Even I, the recipient, know what a bad idea this is.* As his own seiðr channels started to blaze with energy, he sent it all outward in a rush.

Stark gasped and staggered. "What the - ?"

The good captain immediately steadied him. "Tony?"

"I . . . I'm okay," the other said, voice a bit unsteady. "Wha - did any of you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Rogers asked, looking around in alarm.

"You should focus a bit less on me and a bit more on the road," Loki said, giving Stark a smile that was both teasing and a warning.

The rest of them seemed to catch on pretty quick, and Loki found himself pleased. There probably weren't a group of humans with whom he would rather be trekking around the Nine looking for a renegade witch.

"Yes," Thor agreed, giving Stark a small glare.

Loki stopped, turning in a full circle and throwing his gaze wide. Then he pointed to the south. "There is another doorway. It is quite close, actually." He started walking again. "I don't believe the witch is still in Nidavellir, but I suspect it won't be long until we find her. Despite the fact we were here much longer than I intended, her trail is warm."

"Good," Thor said, rolling his impressive shoulders. "I should like to settle this as soon as possible."

"I, as well," Loki murmured. He gave his brother a sideways glance. "You understand, she is not the true challenge we will face?"

"Thanos," Rogers said from behind.

Loki looked at him. "Yes."

"We'll take him," Stark said, ineffably confident.

As in every area of his life. Loki said nothing, and he only just managed not to smile.

Like he'd predicted, their doorway wasn't far. Setting the Avengers to wait, Loki started scouring the autumnal forest for the place the doorway would be. A dark, inconspicuous place that wasn't quite right. It didn't take long, and he found it at the base of a huge, ancient tree. Hiding in its shadow. Rippling and obviously not right.

He returned to the waiting Avengers. "I found it. Do you remember everything I told you about the shadow?"

"Yes," Natasha said, shuddering.

The rest all confirmed.

"Then hold onto each other, and do not let go," Loki instructed as he led them to the door. He automatically reached for his brother.

Only to find Stark had insinuated himself between them. Ah well. *I'll have to pick my battles*, Loki mused with an internal sigh. He allowed Stark to entangle their fingers, and once he saw the rest all link hands he plunged into the shadow.

Though he knew it would be worse for the others, Loki still found traversing shadow this way extremely unpleasant. Cold pressure closed in from every angle, the shadow far more rude and curious about physical beings in its midst. Though it wasn't sentient nor even truly alive, it had some semblance of awareness that made it very dangerous. If he lost his concentration for even a split second, he would be lost.

Not something to which he was accustomed. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if he truly would have been better off to come alone. Just as quickly, he quashed that notion. No, there was safety in numbers. And each of his companions had something unique and powerful to offer the upcoming conflict.

Loki flinched when a body pressed to his side. Stark squeezed his hand so hard it hurt, but Loki just squeezed back. He knew this had to be an unsettling experience for humans. He was not unsympathetic. He didn't allow himself to become distracted, just kept maneuvering through the shadow.

It felt like eternities, it felt like an eye-blink. Loki knew they had covered leagues and leagues and leagues in a fraction of the time before he felt it was time to exit. He nudged his way into the inky folds of shadow, separating the darkness between spaces and stepping out into Nidavellir once more. The Avengers stumbled out behind him, all looking gray and shaken. The shadow doorway vanished in a ripple of black.

Sliding his hand from Stark's, Loki straightened and stepped away, eyes casting about to orient himself. The sun was almost set, which was good. They'd come a long way. He turned back to find the Avengers all giving him strange looks.

Natasha snorted. "You're amazing, you know that? I'm shaking like a leaf and can barely breathe, but you look like you just took a stroll through a pleasant garden."

Raising an eyebrow, Loki gave in to the impulse to smile. "I have done this many, many times, Miss Romanova. Give yourselves a little credit. Until a few days ago, you didn't even know the shadow existed."

Turning, Loki's sweeping gesture encompassed the rugged rainforest now before them. "There are a great many underground rivers in this area. It is there we will find the passage into Muspelheim, and I'm almost certain that's where she is."

"Muspelheim?" Thor repeated, coming to Loki's side. "Then, she will be with Surtr."

"Yes," Loki said. "Rather, she will throw him at us to save her own skin." His eyes swept over the Avengers. "I will be leaving him and his demons to you. I will take the witch on myself."

"Loki -" Thor began.

Loki cut him off with a smile. "Do not worry for me, brother. Once the Aether staff is back in my hands, she will be weak and ineffectual against me."

"Suppose she knows your plan and has laid a trap for you?" Thor countered.

This time, Loki's smile was more cruel. "I'm counting on it. Now, come. It is time we disappeared."

Forty-Second Installment

Forty-Second Installment: Shadows and Doorways

It was strange, Tony thought. The deeper into this quest they got, the farther from Earth he felt. Not distance-wise. Like humanity was being stripped from the Avengers as they took the battle to an enemy more dangerous than anything humanity had popped out.

I'm starting to feel like I belong out here, roaming around like some wild animal. This is so bizarre.

And it was a little unsettling, really. But the stray thought had crossed Tony's mind, what would it be like if this was his life? Minus everyone but the only one he wanted, Loki? What if the two of them were just wandering around the Nine, looking for trouble and stirring it up everywhere? Making magical deals with dwarves, demons, and elves?

And why was that *so* appealing? He was happy with his life back home. Right?

But that life would never, ever include Loki, a tiny voice whispered in the back of his mind. An evil little voice. A mean little voice. Because it was true. Loki would never just settle down in Stark Tower and let Tony take care of him for . . . the rest of their lives. Loki would probably throw him out the window again just for suggesting it. He was a god, a mage, and a tricky fellow who seemed to genuinely enjoy mixing things up.

It was just one of a million reasons Tony loved him.

It was also one of the million miles separating them. *We're kind of forced together right now because we've taken on this task. We have a common goal. But what happens when all this is over? We part ways? For all my billions of dollars back home, I have not one thing Loki wants or needs.*

That was a sobering, frightening thought. Tony didn't flatter himself to believe he himself was enough incentive for Loki to stay. Loki was a god. A very powerful one.

Who suddenly stopped walking and went alert.

Everyone froze, and Thor whipped out his trusty Warhammer.

Loki gave him an only-slightly patronizing smile. "There's no reason for that. Yet. I can sense a group of predators ahead. It will require a little persuasion to get them to leave us alone."

"Unless we went hunting," Thor challenged, slowly spinning his hammer.

To which Loki gave a long-suffering look. "Yes, we could. But when I say a group of predators, I meant many. There is too high a chance someone will be wounded. Why fight when I could simply draw them off?"

Thor didn't quite look convinced. "I dislike you going off alone, brother."

"And I prefer it that way," Loki countered. "I will draw them off. One of you will watch and lead the others at a safe distance. Follow exactly the way I lead, and we will have reached our entrance to Muspelheim by nightfall."

"And how will we do that?" Thor demanded. "The forest is dense, and already it grows dark."

This time, Loki's smile was a bit more . . . mischievous. "Like this, of course."

Clint Barton abruptly vanished. In his place was a surprised-looking hawk.

"Loki!" Thor snapped.

Tony found himself wanting to grin.

Smiling, Loki leaned down and scooped the hawk up to rest on his shoulder. "Relax, brother. Hawkeye has better vision than any of you. And this way, he will be more mobile. It's not as though I hurt him."

But he still looked plenty surprised.

"I want to be a hawk," Tony protested.

"You would," Loki mused. "Take to the skies, Barton. I think you will find flight comes easily and naturally."

It was amusing to see a hesitant hawk, but Clint obediently spread his new wings. A few experimental flaps, then he gave Loki a look best described as helpless. Loki raised his hand, and Clint stepped onto his wrist. Then Loki launched the hawk up into the air. As he'd promised, he seemed to have no trouble flying, and in but a few seconds he was spiraling higher.

"Good," Loki murmured. "All of you follow him, a safe distance behind me."

Thor looked thunderously disapproving. "Did it occur to you to *ask* him if this was all right?"

"Yes, it did," Loki confirmed blithely. "It would have taken twice as long to obtain permission he would have granted. Time you are now wasting by pointless questions. As I said, follow at a safe distance, and trust Hawkeye to know what distance is 'safe'."

With that, he vanished in a haze of green smoke.

Tony had the incredibly inane thought, *What, no goodbye kiss?*

oOo

This, Clint thought, mind spinning, was definitely the strangest experience of his life bar none. Well, actually it was pretty cool to have wings. And like Loki had promised, he was flying as though he'd been flying forever. Also, he could see farther than he'd ever seen, and it was . . . well, wonderful. Sure, it had been quite startling and very unsettling when Loki just turned him into a bird. The world had suddenly gotten a lot bigger.

I'm flying. This is so surreal!

Clint watched as Loki appeared out of nowhere, alone in the middle of the dense rainforest. He moved through the foliage without disturbing a single leaf or blade of grass. It was elegant and graceful, and it actually startled the human. Loki looked like a god, calm and in control and somehow utterly powerful without a visible weapon. Landing on a tree branch, Clint scanned the area for the predators Loki had mentioned.

About a few hundred meters away, he spotted them. A quick glance sized them up. A dozen, no, thirteen. They were enormous, probably five times the size of a horse. They had ragged horns and three eyes, jaws that were obviously capable of unhinging, and long serrated tusks. Their hides

were a leathery brown, a texture that reminded Clint of dry desert dirt. Though Loki hadn't acknowledged them, Clint absolutely didn't doubt the god was already aware of them.

I'm glad we're not fighting those things. We would win, but not without a scratch.

As he watched, Loki abruptly changed forms. In the blink of an eye, he was now a creature that looked a bit like a large wild cat with two whip-like tails. He looked incredibly lean, and strange whip-like appendages extended from his back from bony ridges. He was strangely beautiful, but also somehow frightening. As he watched, Loki threw his head back and let out a bone-chilling cry. Instantly the predators took notice, no hesitation before they lunged into a ground-eating run.

Weird, cat-Loki let out a sound like a laugh before breaking into a graceful run away from the rest of the Avengers. Clint leaped off his branch and winged toward the humans and Thor, letting out a brief shriek to alert them to his presence. He led them into the rainforest. Once they had reached the place Loki had been, Clint gained some altitude to find his target again.

As he watched Loki run, he decided the god had chosen this particular method because he found it enjoyable. *He could probably have charmed them, just like he did those frost spirits. But I think he's enjoying this running.* In fact, he kept letting the huge beasts get pretty close to him before he gave them the slip. It was fun to watch, and Clint wondered if there was some way he could turn into a hawk regularly. The view was incredible.

After maybe an hour of this, Loki led Clint to what looked like a large, crystal-clear pond. He ran around it three times before slipping back into the foliage, and Clint got the message. He led the Avengers to the clear water and flew down onto Natasha's shoulder. She smiled and ran her fingers over the top of his head.

"I presume this is where Loki wants us to be?" she asked.

He squeaked an affirmative.

She chuckled. "You're pretty cute like this. Wonder if I can convince Loki to keep you this way?"

He nipped her ear, and she ruffled his feathers.

Loki walked into the small clearing. "Thank you, Hawkeye. I knew you would be up to the task."

Why did the god's praise matter to him so much? When had that happened? He flew to Loki's shoulder now, looking at him in clear inquiry. *Back to human, now?* Loki smiled, reaching up and tapping his beak.

"I thought you would prefer this form. Should we keep it?"

Clint snapped at his fingers.

Chuckling, Loki gestured to the ground, and Clint took the hint and flew down. A blink, and the world resumed its normal size. He looked down at his body to find it restored to normal.

"That was different," he mused. "Next time a little warning?"

Loki didn't even acknowledge that. He looked at the pool. "Here is where we must go. Would you prefer to make camp here for the night, or enter Muspelheim?"

Thor looked skeptical. "Are we to swim there?"

A mischievous gleam entered Loki's eyes, the normal green washed out in the near-dark. Turning, he walked out onto the water. It rippled beneath his feet. "This is not water, dear brother. It is a very clever illusion."

Clint liked to think he knew Loki well enough by now to state with alacrity, "You didn't tell us on purpose just so you could show off."

Loki rewarded his suspicion with an amused (albeit tiny) smile. "Well, my fellow Avengers? Camp here or in Muspelheim?"

"How dangerous is this other realm?" Steve asked, looking around the clearing.

"Very, but it will not be dark," Loki said. "It never truly grows dark there."

"I'm not tired," Clint said.

"Me neither," Natasha piped up. "We've hardly been walking for miles and miles."

Thor looked at them in apparent contemplation, nodding. "I agree."

"Me, too," Bruce added.

At the others' nods, Loki held his hands out. A pale green nimbus sprang up around them. "As you wish. This will only take me a moment. You will soon see a steep stairway of stone. Do not hesitate to enter. Though dark, nothing dangerous lurks in this passage." Then he smiled. "Unless you consider the droppings of glow worms dangerous."

Natasha snorted.

A few seconds later, the water rippled again and parted. Sure enough, a stone stairway appeared, vanishing down into darkness. Thor strode in without hesitation, his confidence and trust in Loki's word somehow comforting. Steve immediately followed, and one-by-one the humans trailed after. Clint saw Loki follow them, closing the 'water' over their heads.

A green globe of light appeared, hovering beside Loki. The god of mischief made a gesture, and it floated up to hover beside Thor. It was enough to illuminate the stairs, and Clint felt a brief gratitude that he wasn't claustrophobic. It was a bit of a tight fit.

Down they went. After a time, Clint saw a pale blue glow ahead. When they reached the bottom, he looked around in open wonder.

The caverns were all quite sizeable, and there were many pools of dark, still water. Stalactites and stalagmites grew all over the floor and ceiling, glistening in the blue glow. And the cause of the glow was all over the ceiling. Glow worms, giving off a calming glow.

Somehow, it was beautiful.

"Wow," Natasha murmured. "I could get used to this place. Are there any animals in the water, Loki?"

"Small invertebrates," he replied, "but nothing bigger than my hand. Certainly nothing dangerous."

"How big is this place?" Steve asked, turning in a full circle.

"Quite large," Loki said.

Thor shook his head. "I cannot imagine tunnels like these are mapped out in books. How did you learn of so many secret passages, Loki?"

Yeah, being the bearer of secret knowledge definitely pleased Loki. His expression reminded Clint of a preening cat.

"I am both very clever and very determined. Can you not remember how I used to disappear for days at a time? I was always seeking these hidden places, new gems of undiscovered or forgotten knowledge."

An easy picture for Clint to imagine. He'd walked in on Loki reading many a time in Stark Tower. "Most dangerous bookworm I ever met," he muttered.

He hadn't really intended for anyone to hear, but Loki looked at him with a smile that said he had. It was pleased, a bit malicious, and dark.

"Bookworm?" Thor inquired.

Natasha started laughing.

"Studious sort," Tony interjected. "Nose always buried in a book."

"And look how well it has served us," Loki said.

He gave Thor a look that seemed significant.

"Better than my strength," the god of thunder said quietly.

Loki's chin lifted almost imperceptibly, and though he didn't speak Clint knew that admission pleased him.

"Come. Our way through here is not far."

oOo

Tony felt like all the progress he'd made with Loki was gone. The god of mischief was back to his usual, cold self. He wouldn't even let Tony walk beside him, hold hands, or anything. He wanted to shout it to the entire galaxy that Loki had called himself Tony's lover. And here said lover was, acting like they were allies and probably not even friends. Like usual.

He sighed to himself and hoped Loki would pull him into his dreamscape tonight. *Am I alone in my desire to be touching him all the time? Does he want me or is he just tolerating me because I love him?* That was difficult to imagine. Loki doing anything he didn't want? Nah.

I'll just have to be patient.

Loki stopped them at what looked like a dark stone wall. "Our destination lies just beyond. This is a magical barrier, so it will feel strange when you step through. But I thought I'd warn you what we will be facing in Muspelheim.

"You might consider it the complete opposite of Niflheim. The rivers here flow with fire, not water. Volcanic activity has eradicated anything green and growing. The demonic inhabitants of this realm are destructive, and some of them are barely sentient. They are easily dazzled by magic, but demons possess their own rudimentary form of magic. Which means you must be on your guard at all times. They will be drawn to me - demons are actually capable of eating magic."

"Eating it?" Tony repeated, alarm flickering through him.

"In a sense," Loki said. He abruptly smiled. "I'm capable of doing it, too. It's a very effective way of absorbing energy expended in the casting of a stationary spell."

Will you ever stop surprising me? "Damn."

"Actually, they will be drawn to you, as well, Thor," Loki went on.

Tony looked at Thor. "You can use magic, big guy?"

"No . . ." Thor said, "but I do channel it. Through Mjölnir. I have fought demons before. They are weak."

"Most of them are weak," Loki corrected. "Not all. Overconfidence has never served you well, brother."

Thor glared at him, but Loki had already turned away. He reached up and touched the stone wall.

"Prepare yourselves," he said as the surface rippled. "From here, the fight begins."

Forty-Third Installment

Forty-Third Installment: Realm of Fire

"Where did he go?"

"I do not know. My spies have lost sight of him again."

"Find him, Surtr. We cannot underestimate him. You only need to buy me a little more time. I believe I'm almost there with the Aether staff. Whatever enchantment he placed upon it seems to have weakened a little. Foolish little boy underestimated my determination and skill. I will have this staff working for me by the time he comes. Then I will break him. All I need from you is a bit more time."

"You shall have it."

oOo OoO oOo

Muspelheim was dry, unbearably hot, and completely inhospitable. Of all the Nine, this was Loki's least favorite place. As a frost giant, heat did not agree with him. It was more tolerable in his Aesir form, but it was capable of penetrating deeper than the skin. Different form or not, he was still Jötunn.

There was no sun here, so at least he didn't have to worry about that as well as the rivers of fire and lava. As he shed his cloak and stashed it in his Astral pocket, he absently rubbed seiðr over his skin to protect himself from the heat. This realm did have its own beauty, one he could appreciate. He gathered the cloaks of his companions, as well. The glittering medallion on Stark's chest caught his eye.

The design was entirely Loki's idea. The surface of the flat, silver-gold locket looked exactly like Stark's Arc reactor. Which was also stored in Loki's Astral pocket. He wasn't sure what to do with the thing. Though he had no use for it, throwing it away seemed wasteful and . . . well . . .

Wrong. It had been an intrinsic part of Stark for a long, long time. It had kept the human alive. Protected him. He felt an odd sense of gratitude toward the thing. After all, Stark had been influential in the defeat of the Mad Titan and his Chitauri. Stark. His Stark.

Loki's lips quirked a little. Being pursued so doggedly by a man who absolutely refused to give up was a novel experience. Being the sole focus of a man's lustful affection was also new. For the first time, Loki allowed himself to be completely honest. Stark's stubbornness, his intense eyes, the carnal desire pouring off him in palpable waves, these things were all exciting.

When Stark had uttered those three words of devotion, Loki had not been unmoved.

Unmoved. *Stark has the power to move me. I am affected by him.* Whether that was good or bad, it was new. It was exciting. It made Loki feel . . .

Young.

Something he had not felt since he was just a boy.

The realization gave Loki pause. *Stark treats me like I'm younger than him. Like it is he who takes care of me.* It was attention of a kind Loki had never received. Everyone knew Loki was capable of

taking care of himself. He was clever, quick-witted, and more intelligent than anyone else. He didn't need special consideration.

To suddenly have it was . . .

New.

"Loki?" Thor queried softly at his side.

Realizing he was just kind of staring off across the horizon, Loki blinked and refocused his attention. "I can sense her," he mused.

"The witch?" Thor said, gripping the hilt of his hammer.

Loki smiled. "No. My staff." His eyes fluttered shut. It had been far too long since they'd been this close, and she could sense him, too. "Just a little longer, my love. Be patient just a little longer." These last words whispered.

Opening his eyes, he started walking east. "We are quite close to a doorway of shadow. I should think only one more short walk will take us to our final destination. Everyone, be on your guard. Demons roam these plains, and there are many places for them to hide."

"They are like to attack," Thor added.

"I could scout ahead," Barton piped up.

Loki slid him a smile. "Enjoyed being an actual hawk?"

An unapologetic and boyish grin. "Yep."

His attitude toward Loki was quite friendly, these days. *Actually, nearly all of them have displayed some measure of protectiveness toward me. My bargain with him continues to pay off.*

"It's not a terrible idea," the good captain said.

"It is," Loki disagreed. "Nothing flies over Muspelheim. Perhaps we will even encounter why. For now, everyone remain on guard while I locate the shadow doorway."

The Avengers obeyed and formed up. As he concentrated on his task, Loki had to admire the silent proficiency with which they moved. Thor and the captain took flanking positions with Loki, offering silent protection so he didn't have to watch himself and split focus. Barton took point, scouting ahead and sometimes disappearing from sight altogether, only to reappear a few minutes later.

Natasha, Stark, and Banner took the rear. They all radiated calm confidence, none of them thrown by the change of scenery nor acting afraid of what they might soon face. Loki felt an odd sensation in his chest, and it took him a moment to recognize it.

Pride. I find it amusing and a little sad that for the first time I'm comfortable fighting alongside anyone else, and I'm surrounded by humans. Resisting the urge to smile, he refocused on the task at hand.

oOo

Loki led the Avengers across the barren, desolate landscape without hesitation, and Steve noticed something that made him smile. The ebon-haired Aesir wasn't paying one bit of attention to the

potential dangers around him. His eyes were open the barest slit, head turned a little down as if he was listening intently. Steve knew what he was doing, of course, but it was more than that.

He's completely trusting us to do our part. That meant much more to the captain than he could have imagined. It took them from traveling companions to brothers-in-arms.

Their path led them to a wide river of lava, flowing down from a range of blackened mountains. Loki actually kept walking as if he didn't see it, and Thor held out an arm to block him. The younger Aesir blinked and looked around with a small frown. The river was too wide to jump.

Irritation bloomed.

He looked at Thor and Stark. "You two, you've been recruited for shuttle duty. If I use magic here, it will attract demons."

Stark, hopelessly lovesick puppy, immediately volunteered to carry Loki. Whose reaction was an amusing mix of more irritation and mirth. Thor lifted Natasha as if she were a featherweight, using his Warhammer to fly her to the other side, then he came back for Clint.

Unsurprisingly, Loki didn't allow Tony to carry him.

Once they were on the other side of the river, Loki resumed his tracking, and Steve retook his flanking position. They quickly neared the mountains, and Loki led them into a ravine. They hadn't gone more than probably five-hundred meters when a rumbling sound caused all heads to turn, and Clint shouted a warning.

"Above!"

Steve didn't waste time trying to determine the cause of sound, he just reacted. Lifting his shield to guard his head, he bolted forward and saw the others all do the same. Something struck his shield, hard but not particularly heavy. He spared a glance down. Rock.

Presently, the thunder of falling rock lessened until it stopped altogether, and the Avengers slowed. No one was hurt thanks to Clint's warning, but Steve turned to find the ravine now completely closed behind them. The walls were steep and sheer, only broken here and there by small ledges and alcoves.

Loki's face darkened with anger.

"Then they're already aware of us. Demons didn't do this, which means we're being tracked by Surtr's fire giants."

"I can fly up there and check things out," Stark offered.

Steve blinked and took charge. This was his team. "Do it. Those rocks came down from the south side of the ravine. Loki, you have our ear comm buds in your Astral pocket, right? It's time to use them. Thor, go with Stark. It's safe to assume they're targeting Loki, so we'll find a place to lay low while you two take stock."

"There," Clint said, pointing a dozen meters ahead. "That looks pretty deep."

"Good," Steve said.

Loki was watching him with what looked like a glare and a smirk. Not one to simply obey orders. Even so, he didn't waste valuable time arguing. He opened the Astral pocket (something that Steve

didn't understand but had simply accepted) and extracted the comm buds. Once the Avengers were all linked up with Stark's suit, Steve nodded at him and Thor, and they both flew up, hugging the north wall of the ravine.

Keeping his eyes up, Steve followed behind Clint. He kept his shield ready, keeping Loki between himself and the north wall. In less than sixty seconds, they were under the relative safety of an alcove in the ravine wall. It was little more than a deep scar in the rock face, but it would provide protection from anymore falling rocks.

"This isn't exactly the thing to which you agreed," Loki said after a few moments.

Natasha answered before Steve could. "That's the thing about humans, Loki. We change our minds. A lot."

"Especially women," Clint added.

Natasha slugged his arm with a good-natured grin.

"Which tells me human women are more flexible and more intelligent," Loki said with an air of contemplation. "What is the expression? A willow bends with the wind, an oak resists and breaks?"

Steve couldn't help a quiet chuckle.

"I think everyone here agrees with that," Bruce piped up.

A tiny burst of static automatically made Steve look up.

"There are about ten fire giants up here," Tony's voice announced, made a bit tinny through the comm bud. "All on the south wall. Five here, five up ahead. They're starting another -"

A loud rumbling sound cut him off, and Steve looked to see another rockslide about twenty meters ahead down the ravine.

"Shit, they're trying to hem us in," Natasha growled. "Bastards."

Loki let out a short, sharp sound of vexation. "The shadow doorway is gone."

The rumbling stopped.

Then it started raining fire.

o0o

Thor didn't hesitate. When the fire giants started throwing great balls of flame down into the ravine, he launched himself at them. Mjölnir spun in his hand, arcs of lightning already streaking from her silver head. The crackling sound gave him away, but only a split second before he hit the first cluster of five.

Not enough time for them to react.

A sickening crunch and the smell of carbon filled the air, but Thor knew that was far from victory. The heat of lightning wasn't much danger to a fire giant. Only the physical impact of an electrical strike could harm them, which meant Thor wasn't as effective against them as against a frost giant.

And those balls of flame could very much hurt his little brother.

"These bastards are tough," Stark's voice said in his ear. "Heat isn't much good against them."

"I have an idea," Loki said.

Thor opened his mouth to tell his brother to stay where he was, but an instant later he saw a black crow fly up out of the ravine. It materialized as Loki on the north side of the ravine. The fire giants took notice immediately, and Thor lunged at the giant who flung his flaming ball at Loki.

It passed right through the smirking illusion.

Loki appeared right behind the fire giant and slapped his palm against the fire giant's back. A glittering burst of green ensued before vanishing, and the second the fire giant began to turn, Loki disappeared. He reappeared behind another, same green burst, then vanished as they tried to converge.

Then a dozen shimmering Loki-forms appeared, all smirking, and the fire giants lost all semblance of calm. They started charging around, and Thor had to dodge several balls of flame. In less than twenty seconds, Loki had tagged them all with whatever he was doing. The other five, hounded by Stark, all came charging to join the fray, but now Loki disappeared altogether.

That was when the demons struck.

Midgardian literature was actually pretty close to accurate on demonic creatures. They had lava-red skin, which was just as resistant to heat as a fire giant's. Twisted black horns decorated their heads, and they had long spiny tails that ended in a venomous barb. Their eyes were fire-orange with no whites or visible pupils. Some ran on all fours, some were bipedal. Some were barely sentient, others were quite clever.

The dozen-odd demons who came swarming from within the mountains were built a little like bears, almost as big as the fire giants. As they attacked, Thor realized what Loki must have done.

He attached his own seiðr to them somehow. As the demons lunged, jaws gaping, the glimmering green seiðr lit up, and Thor almost winced when serrated fangs sank into the marked skin of the fire giants. Tough as they might be, that had to hurt.

"Well, that's pretty handy," Tony mused.

"Where are you, Loki?" Steve's voice demanded, sounding a little anxious.

Thor blinked when he felt a slight weight on his shoulder, and he glanced to see a green-eyed crow perched there. He smiled. "He's with me, Captain. We should take advantage of their distracted state and vacate the vicinity."

"All right," Steve said. "Stark? A little help with the rockslide?"

"On it, Cap. Keep your tight little ass parked where it is."

Thor's lips quirked in a smile. The fire giants were well and truly distracted by the demons hungrily attacking, so he made his way back to the ravine floor. Loki remained where he was, occasionally glancing upward as if to confirm no one had followed them.

Stark made quick work of the rockslide. "Damn, suit's proficiency is up 400%. Loki, you're officially my hero."

Crows couldn't really smirk, but Thor knew behind the black beak Loki was smirking.

The Avengers ran until the sound of the battle had dimmed, then Loki abruptly flew off Thor's shoulder and materialized in front of them. "The shadow doorway is back," he said, striding toward a sheer face of the ravine wall. He put his hand on it, and it rippled.

"Great," Stark said, removing his helmet. "Is this the last time we're gonna have to do this?"

Loki gave him a small, mean smile. "Afraid of the dark, Anthony?"

The first time Thor had heard him use Tony's first name and he was being a smartass. A term, he thought with an internal smile, he'd learned from Stark.

"A dark that will crawl down my throat and choke me to death?" Tony grumbled. "Hell yes I'm afraid of it."

Looking amused, Loki held out his hand. "It won't harm you as long as you do as I say. Come, we won't have to traverse it long, this time."

Thor linked up hands with the rest of the Avengers. Stark wasn't the only one hoping they wouldn't have to do this again.

Forty-Fourth Installment

Forty-Fourth Installment: Trap

When the Avengers stumbled out of the shadow, the air felt a little warmer and less cloying, but the darkness persisted. For a second, Tony thought he'd been tricked and automatically squeezed Loki's hand. Loki made a tiny, almost inaudible sound of definite protest or warning (or both), and Tony loosened his hold. He refused to let go.

"We're just in another cave system," Loki said, voice soft. "We're not still inside the shadow."

"Where are we now?" Thor's voice asked from somewhere behind them.

"There's a ruined city right above us," Loki replied. A moment later, soft yellow light flared from a lantern. "This was a sewer system of sorts." He pointed toward a tunnel system that seemed to go on forever. "As you can see, it's extensive."

Tony looked around, curious and actually wishing they had time to explore. "How old?"

Loki's lips quirked in a hint of a smile. "It pre-dates humanity's recorded history. This was once a shining jewel in Muspelheim. However, much like Jötunheimr, it fell into chaos when the Casket of Eternal Flame was taken from the realm."

"When was that?" Natasha asked. Her tone wasn't accusatory.

"Almost five thousand years ago," Loki answered.

Long before Loki was even born. "Where did you find that Casket, anyway?" Tony asked. "And who took it originally?"

Loki's amazing green eyes met Tony's. He deigned to answer neither question and turned away, his hand sliding from Tony's before the man could tighten his grip to prevent it. "This city is—or rather, was—enormous. I cannot use magic to search without alerting the witch to my presence, so we will have to do it the old-fashioned way."

Steve sighed. "Well, then we need to make a plan, first. And a place to regroup. Is the witch going to have spells or enchantments to alert her even if we're not using magic?"

"No, but she will have physical traps," Loki answered.

"Hold up," Tony interjected, putting a hand on Loki's slim shoulder. Any excuse to touch. "Jarvis can pick up heat signatures from a pretty significant distance. How about I just do a flyover, real high, do a few scans of the city?"

His lover gave him his full attention, green eyes contemplative. "How far a distance?"

Tony actually felt butterflies—*butterflies*—in his gut. "Couple thousand meters?" *That's right. Loki is my lover.* The more he thought it, the more comfortable the term felt.

Loki's eyes didn't leave Tony's face as he obviously considered the information he'd just been given.

"If you got up there fast enough not to be seen," Steve said after a moment of silence, "that would

save us a lot of time."

"There is no sun in Muspelheim," Thor pointed out, "and no clouds in the sky. Stark would be noticeably different than anything that flies in this realm."

It brought up something Tony had considered but never given any real effort. "Soon as we get home, I'm making a damn cloak."

Blinking, Loki seemed to refocus. "A cloak?"

So curious. So sweet. "A cloaking device, princess," Tony said, wanting to kiss him. "Makes the suit invisible."

The moniker, for once, didn't phase Loki. "Similar to the mirrors on SHIELD's sky carrier?"

"In function," Tony confirmed. "I was thinking more along the lines of an EM field that scatters light particles, obscuring the object from most or all of the electromagnetic spectrum."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "An illusion. How . . . clever. The way you function without magic is quite clever."

Tony really, really wanted to say, *"Don't say things like that. Makes me wanna kiss ya."* He didn't think Loki would go for it, even in jest. He still couldn't help puffing up in pride. "Smartest man you've ever met."

He knew what Loki was thinking before the god even said it.

"Second smartest. I do appreciate your ingenuity, though."

"What about right now?" Steve cut in, sounding only a *teeny* bit impatient. "Will anyone notice Stark if he flies up?"

Loki lifted one shoulder in a shrug, an uncharacteristically sloppy gesture. "I can't guarantee they won't. Nor can I guarantee whether that will trigger a fight or flight response in the witch. There are also hundreds of demons roaming this city. Possibly thousands. A fight could attract their attention."

It was something of a departure, seeing Loki allow Steve to make the decisions how to proceed. It truly made him feel like one of the Avengers. And it made Tony want to kiss him more.

The captain looked to Thor. "Are there ever thunderstorms in Muspelheim?"

Stirring, Loki smiled. It made his eyes glitter in the green light. "Clever, Captain," he murmured. "Yes, but they are rare. *Æsa* won't fall for that."

"It will alert her to our presence prematurely," Thor added.

"What if we build it slowly?" Natasha asked. "Over a day or two? Is that how a storm builds in this realm?"

With a faint snort, Loki shook his head. "No. They're actually sudden and violent."

"Can the suit pick up heat signatures from the ground?" Bruce asked.

"Through walls and walls of stone?" Tony said with a frown. "Well, how about a try. Which way is out, princess?"

This time, he got a rise out of Loki. A darkly warning glare. "Follow me. It would be best to make as little noise as possible. Demons roam through these sewers even more freely than the aboveground ruins."

It took forever. Tony kind of got muscled to his usual position in the back. *Okay, seriously. Why the hell do Thor and the cap get to flank Loki? That should be my job. He's my lover.* Then he had to smile. *Damn, I've got it so bad.*

Jarvis told him it had been thirty-four minutes when Loki doused the lantern and weak light filtered down from above. He stopped and gestured.

"Stark?"

Obediently, Tony flew up and grasped the grate. It took a little coercion to get it to move, and he lifted it out of the way as carefully as possible. He leaned a cautious eye up over the edge, peering around for any baddies.

"Jarvis?" he asked softly.

"No life signs detected within a five-hundred meter radius, sir," Jarvis said.

"Do a geographical scan," he ordered, going back down. "Immediate area is clear. Why don't you sit tight while I do a little recon?"

"Take Hawkeye with you," Steve said. "And be careful."

"I'm always careful," Tony promised, picking Clint up and flying out of the sewers.

Time to see what they were up against.

o0o

Patience was not Thor's strongest attribute. They waited probably twenty minutes before Stark and Hawkeye reappeared. It was difficult to sit and do nothing, and Thor straightened from his slouch against the wall. The Iron Man removed his helmet.

"All right," he said, "I'm pretty sure I know where the witch is holed up. Problem is, this city is enormous, and there's a lot of traffic between where we are now and where we need to be."

Clint nodded. "And there are a lot of buildings still standing. City might be abandoned, but it's not exactly run down. Not everywhere. Gives us plenty of places to hide, but also means there are plenty of hiding places for demons and fire giants."

Thor was ready to say damn them all and fight his way through. How much resistance could they possibly provide?

Loki was watching him with a tiny, knowing smile.

"Do you think Jarvis can pick out the least-traveled path?" the captain asked.

"No problem," Stark said.

"Demons can move very, very fast," Loki warned. "Especially when they've caught a scent."

"Then we'll just have to be even more careful," Steve said. "C'mon, Nat." He braced himself, and with her nimble leap boosted her up to the lip of the edge.

In short order, the seven Avengers were aboveground.

"I'll scout ahead," Hawkeye said, and that quickly he vanished.

"Follow me," Stark instructed.

Ten minutes later, Thor was completely lost. With no sun to orient himself, he had no idea what direction they were headed. To avoid confrontation, Stark had led them on a ridiculously circuitous path. Even so, they still moved quite quickly, which ensured they were making progress at least.

From the rear, Natasha abruptly hissed a low, "Stop!"

Tony threw up an arm, and they all stopped. "What?" he demanded. "There aren't any demons around."

The woman known as Black Widow made her way to the front, pointing between two buildings which had partially toppled. The structures were leaning perilously close to one another. "Up there. See that little thing that looks like a hook? There's one right across from it. I guarantee that's a trap."

"Shit," Tony muttered.

Thor had to smile.

"Good eye," Steve murmured.

"But there's no rope or wire or anything," Bruce said, moving to Tony's side.

Thor automatically looked to his little brother. "Loki?"

Whose eyes narrowed in either concentration or annoyance. "It's most likely magical in nature. I can't confirm that without using magic. Which will attract demons."

"Damn shadow witch and her shifty demons," Stark muttered. "C'mon, let's find another path. You still with me, Hawk?"

"Yes," Clint's voice said over the comm bud. "I can see a lot of those hooks now that I'm looking for them. I can also see some tripwires. Not on all of the hooks. From where I am, I can also see about nine demons. They're not that far from your position."

"Any interest in us?" Steve asked, sounding a little tense.

"Not that I can tell," Hawkeye said. "They're just—wait, they all just bolted like they caught a predator's scent—"

A bone-chilling howl filled the air. Mjölnir was in Thor's hand before he consciously decided to draw her, eyes scanning the abandoned streets.

"You're looking in the wrong direction, brother," Loki said softly.

Was it Thor's imagination, or, for a split second, were Loki's eyes glowing? But no, that would indicate magic use, and surely not. "What?"

Loki waved a slender hand toward the sky. "Up. That was a weyr."

"Uh, translation for the rest of the class?" Stark demanded, looking warily toward the sky.

"A winged demon close in size to the armored Chitauri beasts who flew over the city of New York," Loki said, voice still low. Almost serene. "You only hear a cry like that when a weyr has caught the scent of her prey."

Hawkeye appeared. "I haven't seen it yet."

"You will," Loki all but whispered, and he finally looked up.

The shadow fell over the entire street, and there it was. Red-brown hide rough and craggy, four fire-orange eyes in a face of all teeth, gigantic wings beating almost lazily.

"Run!" Steve commanded. "We need to find shelter!"

"It's too late for that," Loki said. "Do not let her leisurely pace fool you, the second you run she will strike."

"What do you suggest?" Steve demanded.

"I cannot fight that creature," Loki said, expression betraying no fear, but a definite hesitance. "She will devour my magic until she's drained me dry."

"Then take shelter, little brother," Thor ordered, beginning to spin Mjölnir. "We will see how it fares against all of us." Lightning arced over his hand and arm as he launched himself into the air. "Iron Man!"

"Right behind ya, buddy," Stark said at once.

Loki was right. The second Thor moved toward the weyr, it struck. Her wings collapsed against her body and she fell into a dangerously fast dive. Her great, gaping maw opened to expose no less than six rows of teeth, and she snapped at Thor as she neared him.

Thor only barely managed to avoid her, not fully prepared for that much speed from something so enormous. He allowed himself to fall back, flinging Mjölnir at her. It struck her in the side of the jaw, but it did little more than rock her back. Thor didn't let that slow him down, recalling his Warhammer and charging it with blue-white lightning. This time he came at the weyr from above, slamming down with all his strength on the creature's neck.

That elicited an ear-splitting shriek, and the weyr thrashed in midair but didn't go down. Banner and Stark joined the fight, the latter firing at her with his suit's impressive arsenal. What did he call that beam of super-heated light? A laser? The creature didn't fall, and abruptly her movements sped up. Her great wings and whip-like tails became weapons, and all three men had to avoid snapping jaws.

Banner, green and full of rage, landed on her back and gripped her neck in a bear hug.

Another shriek filled the air, this time not from the weyr already in sight. Heart skipping a beat, Thor turned his head to see another one flying toward them at breakneck speed. It was little more than a blur as it rammed into Thor full force, sending him flying. Dust and rubble rained down on him as a building broke his fall.

Growling, he launched himself back into the air.

"Shit, we've got company!" Clint's voice came over the comm bud.

Dozens and dozens of demons swarmed over and around the nearby buildings. Their target was

obvious, they completely ignored everything else.

"Protect Loki!" Steve yelled, and Thor saw him send three sprawling with his shield.

But the second Thor tried to rush to his aid, the newly arrived weyr took advantage of his distracted state to dive toward the Avengers on the ground. No, toward Loki. Thor charged Mjölfnir and threw himself at the beast.

"You will not touch him!" he snarled.

It was impossible to watch two great winged beasts, at least four dozen demons, the rest of the Avengers, and Loki all at once. He could tell his little brother wasn't using magic, simply fighting with small daggers. He was very proficient with them, a deadly warrior even without his weapon of choice, but without that edge their disadvantage became clear quickly.

They were too badly outnumbered.

That was when a third weyr joined the fray.

Clint had made his way atop a partially crumbled building, giving him a great vantage to fire down on the demons or up at the weyrs. "These guys don't seem very bright," he said after a minute.

Thor risked a glance down and saw what Hawkeye meant. The demons were just rushing around will nil, obviously attacking without strategy or as a cohesive unit. It was making it easy to pick them off one by one, and Loki had found a fantastically defensible position on a window ledge in a narrow alley. He couldn't be surrounded. Steve was right below him with his shield, and Thor felt a rush of gratitude.

"Help with the weyrs, Hawkeye," Loki said abruptly. "The demons aren't a real threat. They are simply to provide distraction. Weyrs always hunt in pairs, which means a fourth will appear soon."

"Great," Stark's voice said. "'Cause this wasn't enough of a party with three."

Thor tried to remember all he knew about weyrs. The facts in his mind numbered few. First, weyrs didn't gather in packs. They paired off and aggressively attacked any other pairs. This little congregation was unnatural. Weyrs also weren't remarkably intelligent, though they could be quite clever when hunting. He knew they normally targeted other flying demons.

The fourth weyr descended on them like a falling mountain. It just fell down on the one Banner was fighting, causing it to topple out of the sky with a shriek, driving it into the weyr trying to pin Stark. They crashed to the ground, probably killing at least six demons and demolishing one building and another half. The ground shook, and Thor saw Clint nearly lose his perch, both Natasha and Steve staggering.

"Everyone okay?" Steve asked as dust and rubble came raining down.

"Weyrs are just as dangerous on the ground," Loki warned. "Watch out for -"

Three long, thickly muscled tails all whipped out at the same time, and Thor winced to see Banner go flying, the Hulk growling like a wounded animal.

"Their tails," Loki finished.

"At least they're taking some of those damn demons with them," Stark muttered.

"More incoming," Clint announced, loosing an arrow right through one of the demon's heads.

The three weyrs on the ground, who thrashed to get untangled from each other and Banner, abruptly came out of it with terrible shrieks. Thor realized what they were doing a split second before they moved, and he instantly abandoned his own target. Mjöltnir blazed with blue white energy as he lunged down, and he heard and felt bone crack beneath the force of his blow as he slammed down on one weyr's head.

But there was no way to stop three such massive creatures, and Natasha and Steve had to scramble to get out of the way. Thor saw one of Clint's arrows bury itself into one of the weyr's eyes, but the third one received no challenge. Thor's automatic reaction wasn't fear, Loki was a potent fighter. Indeed, nimble as a sprite he leaped up off his ledge right onto the weyr's head and drove one of his silvery daggers right into two of its four eyes in a half second. The creature went down with a wailing shriek, whole body contorting as it tried to get Loki off.

For whatever reason, that sound seemed to trigger something in the other three weyrs. They went from acting like four different beasts to a pack of one mind. Their focus intensified powerfully, and not even Mjöltnir slowed Thor's target down.

"Loki!"

Displaying remarkable speed and agility, Loki managed to avoid the brunt of a four-weyr strike, aided a bit by Banner who charged at one and shifted its angle with sheer force. But they still clipped Loki, and Thor reflexively winced. His little brother tucked his shoulder into a tight roll and landed on his feet, but he could tell the blow had hurt. Worse, the two weyrs unaffected by Banner didn't slow down for an instant and both spun to whip their tails toward Loki.

Steve responded this time, already sprinting toward the Aesir. The clang of a tail striking his shield set Thor's teeth on edge. Loki leaped up and landed on top of the other tail, dashing right up the weyr's spine and plunging both his daggers into the base of the beast's skull. Thor could tell right away the beast's skull was too thick for that to do little more than anger it. It threw itself right into the already-stressed building beside it.

Loki was too quick for that trick, leaping forward into a roll. No sooner had he hit the ground than the other weyr leaped up and came lunging down. Displaying its ability to learn on a hunt, its wings swept out wide to form a kind of net to keep Loki from getting away. Hemming him in. More unnatural behavior. Weyrs didn't trap their prey, they just ran it down. Thor targeted that one.

As soon as he came, one of the four leaped at him to block him, its own wings extended out. Growling incomprehensibly, Thor immediately changed tactics.

"Banner! Stark!" he called. "Target their wings. They're trying to hem Loki in!"

He threw Mjöltnir with all his might, the burst of electric energy slamming the weyr away, backing it up enough Thor saw Stark's laser tear into one of the beast's wings. Relentlessly, Thor threw his entire body weight into his next attack, straight at the beast's snapping jaws. Another crack of bone. But he could already tell it was a losing fight when Stark had to shift his attention from the weyrs to the demons on the ground, which kept swarming. There were hundreds of them now.

That left one weyr to Banner, one to Thor, and left two on Loki. And as serrated teeth nearly got Thor before he dodged out of the way, the two weyrs used their mammoth size to trap Loki between them with their tremendous wingspan. There was no way for him to escape without magic, but that would result in disaster. He could visualize what would happen right before it happened.

Both weyrs lunged down with jaws snapping and claws extended, faster than striking snakes. Fast as he was, Loki couldn't avoid six slashing attacks. One four-clawed foot, bigger than Loki, slammed the Aesir down onto the ground, and that seemed to be as much as Loki could take. He vanished in a cloud of pale green smoke.

It worked for less than a second and transported Loki maybe ten centimeters. The two weyrs started up a kind of howling, and Thor watched them inhale Loki's magic. Loki himself reappeared on hands and knees with an audible gasp. The weyrs struck again, and this time they both latched onto his slender body. Thor's vision went red when he heard Loki let out a very faint cry of pain as claws dug into flesh and blood splattered over the ground beneath him.

Then, before any of the Avengers could untangle from their own battles, both weyrs leaped into the air. Only a few seconds later, Loki abruptly went limp in the beast's talons, and the two remaining weyrs threw themselves onto Stark and Thor to prevent pursuit. Thor, despite his own almost numbing horror, wasn't the one who let out the heartbreaking cry.

"LOKI!"

Forty-Fifth Installment

Forty-Fifth Installment: All Too Easy

Æsa couldn't stop the smile as she strode down the halls of the long-abandoned temple. *It would seem you completely overestimated Loki, Thanos. It wasn't particularly difficult to capture him and separate him from his fool brother and humans.* Not only that, but those who called themselves Avengers were still running around the ruined city where her weyrs had attacked them. As if she would be so stupid as to be there.

They'll never find me here.

"You have him?" Surtr demanded, appearing at her side.

The fire giant looked almost frantic.

"Yes," Æsa replied, "and no, you can't come with me. I'm not quite ready to turn you loose on him. I want to try again to obtain his cooperation. If he refuses, well. Feel free to get creative."

He didn't quite look mollified, but he sighed and nodded. "Fine. Should I inform Thanos?"

"No," she said. "He broke with us. I don't keep traitors in my confidence. Don't fear, Surtr. As long as you and I remain united, there is no one who can threaten us."

He half smiled. "Yes. I will have my fire giants watch for any sign the Avengers have discovered where we are."

"Impossible," she scoffed. "Loki was the only one who knew how to locate me, and he is now mine. Still, vigilance never hurts. Let me know if there are any changes."

Nodding, he turned on his heel and strode back the way he'd come. Smile strengthening, Æsa continued to the room she'd devoted to conditioning Loki. This temple was built of a strong black stone, several of the rooms constructed right around lava pools. As a frost giant, Loki's tolerance to heat would be much lower than her own. The sweltering temperature within was unpleasant, but it wasn't intolerable.

To her.

Loki lay on a black slab of stone, naked from the waist up and barefoot. A moat of lava bubbled around the altar-like slab, and Loki was bound to it by bands of shadow. Around his neck was a thick collar that severely restricted his impressive magic ability. *I'm not entirely certain I would be able to defeat him in a contest of strength.* It just made his capture all the more heady.

Sure, he'd escaped twice before. This time would be different, because that beautiful staff he'd built was now working for her. His enchantment to keep it from obeying her had finally been broken by her insistence. One way or another, Loki would be hers.

Reaching down, she stroked his pale cheek. "Wake up," she purred. "Show me those incredible eyes, Loki."

It took a few moments, but eventually his eyelids lifted off the verdant surfaces of his eyes. For a moment he appeared completely disoriented, then they cleared and he blinked. His throat worked for a second before his lips parted.

"Æsa," he croaked.

Not particularly surprised. But then, he was very quick-witted. She smiled. "Hello again, young one. When last we parted, you left a little gift that almost ended me. Shall I return the favor?"

It wasn't quite fear in his eyes as he gazed at her.

She laughed. "The problem is, I don't want to kill you. You have utterly captivated me, Loki. So clever, so cunning, so devious. You are absolutely beautiful to me."

He minutely tensed, no doubt testing the strength of his bonds. "We've been through this, Æsa. I have no interest in joining your little following."

"Yes, you did tell me once you weren't a team player," she mused. "And yet you've joined a team. A *human* team. I admit, I find that infuriating and insulting. Tell me something. In what way are those humans better than me?"

He didn't speak, but was that *pity* that filled his eyes?

"I would appreciate an answer."

"It isn't complicated," he said after a moment. "They aren't unstable, and they're not so old they're no longer capable of creative thought."

Anger tinted her vision red. "You *really* shouldn't antagonize me in this position, Loki," she warned.

"I'm not afraid of you."

Taking a deep breath, Æsa smiled. "You should be. That little enchantment you placed on your staff to keep me from being able to use it? I finally discovered it and broke it."

She had the tremendous pleasure of seeing his eyes widen in shock before he caught himself. "Impossible."

"Entirely possible," she said, regaining her composure. Her grin was darkly amused. "It has happened. Why do you think I had you brought to me? And you were very clumsy, I might add. Using magic, even a little bit? You lit up like a beacon and attracted the weyrs' attention. I honestly expected better."

She saw his jaw clench, and for the first time a hint of fear entered his eyes. It was delicious.

"I escaped you twice," he said, voice even. "I will do it again."

"No," she murmured, stroking his face. Such a beautiful face. "You won't." She put a hand over his slender chest, making sure to avoid his heart and lungs. A spike of shadow lanced up from the black stone, right through him.

The sound he made . . . Æsa shivered in delight. Not quite a scream, a kind of choked cry, eyes squeezing closed. This was a different kind of trauma than physical. Shadow didn't exactly cause a wound like a blade would. But it was just as painful, perhaps even more so for how unnatural it was. It was for her inventive uses of shadow she'd earned the moniker Shadow Witch all those eons ago.

"I won't needlessly punish you," she promised, stroking his face and neck, catching drops of

perspiration. "Perhaps when you've received a little demonstration of the Aether obeying me, you will give up this resistance. I'll be back in a while, Loki. Use this time to consider your position and reevaluate your stance." Leaning down, she pressed her lips to his forehead.

Then she left. The shadow would ensure he stayed right where she left him.

ooo

The last weyr crashed to the ground and caused a localized earthquake. Tony, locked in a frenzy, fired his laser right into its four eyes, snarling like a wounded animal.

"Sir, it's dead," Jarvis said.

They both were. Probably two hundred demon corpses littered the ground, all around the two dead winged beasts. Landing, Tony wrenched his helmet off, chest heaving like he'd run a fifty-mile marathon. The rest of the Avengers immediately ran to him, all wearing near-identical expressions of worry.

"I don't know where they went," Tony growled, eyes darting all over the sky as if they would magically appear.

Immediately after the weyrs had hauled off with his lover, Tony had managed to disentangle himself and tried to give chase. Only to find they'd vanished. A flyover and scan by Jarvis told him they were likely not in the ruins at all.

"We need to stay calm," Natasha said, and though her gaze encompassed them all it ended on Tony. "We can't help him if we're panicking."

"Standing around chatting calmly won't help him, either!" Tony snapped.

Thor's hand landed on his shoulder, warm and heavy. "I know you love him," he said softly, "so do I. We *will* find him, Stark."

"Love?" Banner repeated quietly.

Tony rounded on him. Loki had cleverly enchanted his clothes to stretch with the Hulk's emergence. "Yeah, love. Got a problem with that?"

"Not at all," Banner said, holding up his hands. "I'd be the very last person to question someone's sanity." A crooked grin.

Relaxing, Tony scrubbed both hands over his face. "Sorry, buddy. I'm just real on edge." He looked up at Thor, feeling desperate. "How do we find him?"

Thor's blue eyes were filled with anxiety. "I'm not sure. Loki is the one who had been tracking the witch."

Steve looked up to the sky and pointed west. "The weyrs flew off in that direction before they disappeared. Since they'd accomplished their objective, it might be a safe assumption the witch is west of here. They wouldn't be thinking about misleading us at that point. Would they?"

After a moment of silent contemplation, Thor nodded. "They're not that intelligent. Unless the witch was directly controlling them."

"We have to start somewhere," Natasha said, and Tony saw her take a small step closer to Steve.

An unconscious gesture of worry.

Tony felt a burst of warmth in his chest for them.

Clint, who had been looking west, faced the Avengers. "They didn't just vanish. We've been traveling with Loki for quite a while now, so I know what that looks like. They went through some sort of doorway. I'd bet my life on it."

"Let's go check it out, then," Steve said, grabbing Natasha's hand. "Lead the way, Hawkeye."

Glad to have a job, Tony fell in beside Thor and did his best not to imagine the worst.

oOo

Heat, dry and terrible, drove Loki to consciousness. His entire body was coated in sweat, providing at least a bit of a shield. It wasn't a foreign sensation. He'd never in his life liked high heat, and the Mad Titan had often used it in his attempts to break Loki and enslave his will. Closing his eyes, Loki focused on his body for a moment to determine how long since he'd passed out.

At least four hours, he decided. He felt a burst of irritation. Where was the witch? She ought to have come back to gloat. He knew very well her fascination in him went beyond professional curiosity. She wasn't just interested in his magic ability. She wanted *him*. Whether as a partner, servant, or slave he wasn't quite sure. He didn't care. Whatever she planned, it wouldn't work.

The shadow spike currently impaling him rippled, and Loki's entire body jerked in pain. This particular sensation was new. Thanos had never used shadow in this way. Loki didn't care for it, but it wasn't as bad as some of things the Mad Titan had inflicted on the god of mischief. Breathing deeply made the pain worse, so Loki focused on taking short, shallow breaths that didn't move his chest as much.

He heard the door open and looked up. Æsa strode in with the Aether staff in her hand. A satisfied smile stretched her lips. Loki resisted the urge to give her a scornful smirk. She was still wearing the form of a youthful maiden.

"Are you feeling a bit more amenable now, my pet?" she purred. "I thought you might like to see your creation. It is quite magnificent in my hands, wouldn't you agree?"

He most certainly did not. She looked like a fool, trying to wield something she truly did not understand. Even the way she held the staff told the same story. It took all Loki's willpower not to remark on that. It wasn't time. Not yet.

"You look worried," she said with a little laugh. "It's justified." So saying, she thumped the butt of the staff on the stone floor, and a globe of green light expanded out to encompass her like a glittering shield.

Loki stared in open wonder. *Do you not even grasp the implications of that, you fool? It's green. Not orange.*

She laughed again. "Why, Loki. You look like you've seen a ghost."

If she interpreted his incredulity wrong, well, so much the better. He swallowed as if nervous. "How did you do that?" His voice even shook a little.

The staff vanished from her hand, and she strode to him. Her hand stroked his face. "Once I finally figured out what you'd done, it was easy. Has my little demonstration swayed you?"

He jerked away from her touch. Playing a role or not, her touch repulsed him. "Never."

She sighed again. "Well, no matter. I have time. All the time in the world."

Loki couldn't help crying out again as a second spike of shadow lanced up through him, a few inches below the first. He let himself react to the pain stronger this time, panting and gasping for breath. She watched him with something very like avarice.

"I'll give you more time," she said, turning. "The second you accept me, Loki, is the second this stops."

When he was alone again, Loki slowly brought his body back under control. Breathing hurt more now, but this still wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

He'd suffered much, *much* worse.

oOo

The site of the magic doorway Clint had seen turned up nothing the Avengers could use. Steve had Tony fly overhead and scan the perimeter, which ultimately attracted the attention of several flying demons. They wasted precious time dealing with them before they agreed no more flight unless there was an emergency. Then, even though there was nothing to indicate whether it was the right choice, they headed west.

Not a single one of them wanted to stop, but eventually sheer exhaustion forced it. Steve assigned a rotating watch so everyone could get some sleep. Most of them had bruises and injuries of varying severity from their scuffle with demons, but the regenerative magic Loki had given them worked quickly and efficiently. After a few hours of sleep, not a scratch remained.

When they resumed heading west, it was Natasha who posed the question Steve had been half considering.

"Was Loki's capture too easy?"

"I was wondering the same thing," Bruce said.

"I thought I saw Loki's eyes glowing, for just a moment," Thor said quietly. "It had crossed my mind that he might have drawn those demons to us."

"But why?" Tony demanded.

Silence, for a time. Then,

"Maybe he knew he couldn't get close to the witch," Natasha said. "She would just run again. So he took matters into his own hand, had her lackeys bring him to her."

Steve gazed forward. It did make a kind of twisted sense. "It's entirely possible he's right where he wants to be," he agreed.

"Which means he has a plan," Tony said, hope flaring in his dark brown eyes. "He wouldn't do something so risky without a plan. Right?"

"He would not," Thor said, nodding. Confident.

Steve saw each one of the Avengers relax. It was subtle, almost invisible. He almost smiled. *If anyone could do it, Loki could. He's definitely not the sort to shy away from something just because*

it's dangerous. Even insane.

"Let's not make any assumptions," Tony said.

"Agreed," Steve said. As they resumed walking, he sighed to himself. Even if Loki hadn't meant to get captured, it was still far more likely he would escape on his own and find the Avengers before they found and rescued him.

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After two days, the heat in Loki's temporary prison completely dehydrated him until he couldn't sweat anymore. It felt even more unbearable after that, drying his skin rapidly. In an hour, it started to crack and blister. His throat was so dry he could no longer talk, it hurt too much. Æsa appeared, like clockwork, every four hours. Loki's resistance grew less every time, carefully structured to lower her guard and boost her ego.

Honestly, she still had done nothing that Loki couldn't tolerate. He made sure that never showed on his face.

Predictably, on the fourth hour she strolled in. His staff was in her hand, gleaming in the dim light of the room. This time, Loki flinched when she reached down and touched his face, recoiling but not pulling away, a subtle display of submission. He could feel a pulse of desire from her and swallowed a laugh. For someone so old and powerful, she was rather foolish.

Actually, she kind of reminded him of Odin. So set in his ways he was like a horse wearing blinders. Powerful, but not dangerous. Not to someone like Loki.

"Well, my pet?" she purred. "How are you feeling? Ready to accept my offer, yet?"

Loki glared up at her, a last-ditch effort at defiance. If she didn't break this time, she was nearly there. "I will never ally myself with such an ancient fool." His voice was thin and ragged.

The pleasure vanished from her eyes in a split second, and Loki's body arched off the slab of stone when another spike of shadow lanced up through his thigh. There were six impaling him, now. The sound it wrenched out of him made his aching throat scream in protest.

I only need you to do one simple thing, witch. Just one.

"You must enjoy pain," she growled. "I'm beginning to think your insults are deliberate."

His lips peeled away from his teeth in a rigid parody of a smile. "I enjoy watching others make fools of themselves."

Fury made her eyes harden and her nostrils flare. "I'm through playing nice. You *will* submit to me, Loki. Willingly or not, I will have you!"

And finally, *finally* she did what he wanted.

She touched him with the staff.

Forty-Sixth Installment

Forty-Sixth Installment: Aether

. . . finally she did what he wanted. She touched him with the staff.

Before, she was surrounded on all sides by black. An emptiness so pervasive it was darker than black. Deeper than black. There was really no sense of self to appreciate the depth. Until that human woman. Until that spark that ignited into a flame. Then there was the one who called himself Malekith. She still did not understand enough to interact with him, to demand else. Then a return of the darkness she began to hate. A time of trying to figure out a way free.

Then him.

Loki.

He spoke to her. Drew her attention. Made her realize she wasn't simply a reactive force. She was something much more. Every time he slid inside her consciousness, she wanted him there longer. Wanted to hold onto him. Pull him deeper. Because of him, she had a name for this. Love. He did not treat her like something to be used. He made her feel. Feel all sorts of things. Made her want a thing she'd never known.

Freedom.

But not from him.

When he told her of his plan to kill the one he called Shadow Witch, she immediately agreed. Her role, Loki told her, would make it all possible. He needed her, and she was plenty eager to help him. When she felt him near to her again for the first time in what she believed was far too long, it was almost impossible for her not to give herself away. But Loki had promised her she would know when the time was exactly right.

Of course, she couldn't physically move. She didn't have a body. She made sure Shadow Witch thought she was just a piece of metal capable of channeling energy, because then Shadow Witch brought her to Loki. It was hard to see him in a state of pain the first time Shadow Witch brought her. It was even harder to obey Shadow Witch's command to perform.

The second time Shadow Witch brought her, she felt flushed with anger. Then laughter as her Loki insulted Shadow Witch, riling the weak one into attack. And suddenly, the time was right. Shadow Witch brought her down to touch Loki, and then it didn't matter Loki couldn't use magic, because she had all the power he needed.

o0o

Truly, what he had accomplished was a miracle of epic proportions. He didn't flatter himself to say no one else could have done it. As soon as the staff touched his body, the witch no doubt thinking to use it to torture him, the powerful connection he had with the Aether reformed. Distance had not dulled it. Because she was contained in a barrier of his seiðr, the instant they touched it flowed into him.

The fool witch seemed to realize her mistake, but she was too late. The connection had been formed.

In the blink of an eye, the shadow pinning him vanished, and healing seiðr flooded his veins. The witch actually tried to pull away, but Loki was faster than a striking snake. He grabbed his staff and yanked the witch close, knowing his eyes were now glowing bright green. His lips curled into a frozen smile.

"Oh, no, witch," he purred. "It's too late for that. Aether."

A black nimbus instantly surrounded the staff and flooded up around the witch's arm, and Loki absolutely relished her scream. Loki released the staff, sitting up. Glittering lines of seiðr appeared on his skin as his own energy continued to heal him. And the powerful presence of the Aether flowed all around him, ecstatic to be with him again. He smiled.

I won't leave you alone again, my darling, he promised.

Don't, she said. *Don't, don't.*

Taking his time, Loki swung his legs over the edge of the slab. A bridge of glowing black appeared over the moat of lava, unnecessary by now, but Loki accepted her help. He made his way forward.

"There's something I want you to understand," he said, striding toward the witch who still couldn't move. "The Aether only obeyed you because I told her to do so. I never enchanted her so you couldn't use her."

The witch glared up at him through pain-hazed eyes. "I don't understand."

Loki stopped in front of her. "This isn't a magical staff," he said, enjoying her pain and confusion. "It's not even a weapon. Well, not in anyone's hands but mine."

"If it's not a weapon, what is it?" the witch gasped.

Loki smiled. "She's a person, of course."

The Aether, still flowing from the staff, reacted to those words with an outpouring of love, coiling around him.

"And she loves me," Loki continued.

The Aether squeezed tighter around the witch.

"And she would do anything for me," Loki went on.

Black oozed up the witch's arm and neck.

"And right now, what I want," Loki concluded, "is for you to die, Æsa."

"I had you!" the witch shrieked, dropping to her knees and still trying to drop the staff. "I *had* you! You were mine!"

Loki lowered himself to her level to look her straight in the eye. "No. I was never anywhere except exactly where I wanted to be. Why else would I use magic to lure your demons? Or present the weyrs such easy prey? I could simply have charmed them into leaving."

"They *eat* magic!" she protested.

"Well, offensive magic, certainly," Loki agreed. "Even a dumb beast will defend itself."

"I *watched* your Avengers," she tried. "They were frantic to protect you!"

"They, too, were part of my plan," Loki said, reaching out and cupping her chin in his fingers. "All to get you to lure you into my trap. I knew it would be easy. I just didn't think it would be *this* easy." His hand turned blue.

Æsa clenched her teeth as his frozen touch burned her skin.

For a moment, Loki hesitated. Killing her would be simple. Not so long ago, he wouldn't have batted an eye. He bit his lower lip. *The captain would not approve. Nor would Thor or Banner.* The rest might be indifferent. But if he didn't kill her, what would he do with her? Take her to Asgard to face imprisonment for the rest of her life? No. That would only give her the chance to escape. And humans didn't have the means to hold a witch of her power.

He sighed. Letting her go so he could hunt her down again would send the wrong message to his human companions. It just didn't make sense to let her live. Surely even Captain Rogers would see that.

"I thought I would enjoy killing you," he said, rising. "Turns out, this is a bit anticlimactic. Still, pests must be eradicated." He held out his hand.

The Aether staff materialized in his grip, the metal cool and strong and smooth. Green and black swirled together around him, a living nimbus etched into his skin. Æsa cowered away from him, all her bravado gone. A pitiful wretch. The Mad Titan would not have given into fear so easily.

Nor would he be so easily defeated.

"Destroy her, my darling," he murmured. "Take her power for your own."

It was over so quickly the Shadow Witch didn't even have time to scream. It was almost sad. *It took her centuries to build her reputation as the Shadow Witch.* It took him less than a second to destroy it all.

The Aether laughed.

oOo

Thor recognized where they were. "We are perhaps ten leagues from Surtr's city," he told the Avengers.

Tony didn't particularly care to hear this realm's history, not when Loki was still unaccounted for. "The witch likely to be there?"

"No," Thor said slowly, "but there are many abandoned temples. Muspelheim used to be a scholarly retreat eons past. Demons are one of the few creatures in the Nine about whom little are known. It brought many travelers from all over."

"Fascinating," Tony said, not feeling fascinated in the least. "Sounds like her kind of hidey hole. How about I do a flyover?"

"Dangerous," Steve said.

Tony was past caring. "We've been wandering for almost three days. I'm real sick of this. We need to find him *now*, or I'm gonna start looking for heads to bash in."

"Save your strength for the true conflict yet to come," Loki's voice said.

Whirling, Tony about swallowed his tongue to see Loki materialize and stride toward them. Something stopped him from rushing to the god or even smiling. Black. Loki had appeared in a haze of *black*. His countenance was hard and unsmiling. He radiated danger so palpably it felt like a shield of knives, and in his hand was that staff.

The Aether staff.

Tony realized he'd not yet seen Loki wielding it. Holding it idly in his lab, yes. Wielding it, no.

He wasn't the only one shocked into silence.

Only Thor appeared unintimidated by Loki's arrival. He strode forward. "What happened, brother?"

"Æsa is dead," he replied.

No fuss. No preamble. No warning. Just . . .

"What?"

"You may as well have Heimdall take you back to Asgard," Loki went on, ignoring Steve's incredulity. "He's perfectly aware of you, wandering out in the open as you are."

He turned as if to go. Tony reacted a fraction of a second after Thor, both of them reaching for Loki to keep him from moving.

"Where d'ya think you're going?" Tony demanded, feeling a complicated rush of anger, anxiety, relief, and exasperation. "You can't just disappear for three days, reappear and drop that nuclear bomb, and vanish like nothing's happened. That's not how we do it."

Loki wanted to argue. He wanted to resist and say he didn't care how they did it because he wasn't an Avenger. It was all over his beautiful face. His dark, dangerously dark, beautiful face. His posture didn't speak of relenting so much as yielding.

"All right, I will fill you in. But not right now. I have one last thing to do before then." He reached up and pushed thunderer's hand off his arm. "Take them back to Asgard, Thor."

"No," Thor snapped, reaching out and again grasping Loki's arm. "You killing the witch has made you an even bigger target for the Mad Titan. It isn't safe for you to be alone right now."

Loki once more pushed his hand off, displaying remarkable patience for once. "I won't be alone, brother. Or did it somehow escape your notice the Aether is at my side once more? She will protect me better than you. All of you."

Tony felt an irrational surge of jealousy and hurt. *Jealous of a hunk of metal? Really, Stark?*

"Besides," Loki went on, his face abruptly relaxing into a hint of a smile, "there's someone waiting for you there. Someone I think you will be very happy to see. I promise, I will join you no later than tomorrow evening."

"All right," Thor said, still looking unhappy. "I will hold you to your word, little brother."

This time, Loki did smile, small and soft. "I'm sure you will."

Deciding the mood was better, Tony now grabbed Loki's arm and steered his lover (*I can still think of him as my lover, can't I?*) away. Loki allowed it. The staff, gleaming black behind a shield of green, seemed to pulse when he touched Loki.

"Need any help?" he asked, voice low. Sure, Loki probably didn't. Tony just didn't want to be separated from him. Not after spending three days thinking Loki was being tortured by his captor.

Loki gazed into his eyes for several moments. "No," he said after a moment, but his voice wasn't impatient or cold. "It's best if I go alone. This time." And though his lips didn't move much, a rare, *rare* smile blossomed on his face.

Tony's chest tightened with something stronger than desire. "Okay, fine. But are you okay? She didn't . . . hurt you?"

The smile didn't fade. "I'm fine, Stark. She was never capable of hurting me. Not to any distressing degree. I will see you in Asgard. The Aesir are good, at least, for making visitors feel welcome."

Tony wasn't quite convinced. Loki was real good at hiding things. "You sure?"

This smile was more mischievous than the previous one. Loki leaned down the tiny necessary bit to put his mouth *right* next to Tony's ear. "When we're alone, I'll let you determine that for yourself."

Tony's self-control seriously almost died. "Fucking tease," he breathed.

Loki's lips ever-so-lightly brushed his ear as he drew back. "Also, the Aether is very curious about you. She wants to get to know the man who loves me."

Why, oh *why* did it affect Tony so much, hearing Loki say that? That was far more than a simple statement. There was total acceptance in Loki's tone and eyes. Tony was ridiculously grateful he was still wearing his suit, because otherwise his knees would have buckled.

"Shit, you're being so sweet right now," he managed. "Sure I can't kiss you before you haul your cute ass off to god knows where?"

"I'm sure," Loki said, laughter audible in his voice. He turned, and a doorway of shimmering black appeared. With a wave to Thor and a last smile for Tony, he stepped through. It vanished like a popped soap bubble.

Tony jumped when Thor's heavy hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed.

"I haven't seen him so affectionate in a very, *very* long time," he said, looking down at Tony with a gentle acceptance of his own.

Tony drew himself up with a cocky smile. "Hey. It's me."

"Didn't think I'd ever see that," Natasha mused.

Tony raised an eyebrow at her. "See what?"

The smile she gave him was full of mischief and secrets. "Loki falling in love."

oOo

Despite the calm manner with which the Avengers had taken Loki's news, Thor knew it weighed on their minds as Heimdall returned them to Asgard. It was almost strange to be back home after

everything that had happened. It had been a long journey with a tremendously unsatisfying end.

"Do you think she's really dead?" Steve asked quietly.

Thor could understand how hard it was, especially for the captain, to hear reminders of how dangerous Loki was. While he might not be an evil heartless villain like SHIELD would believe, he certainly wasn't *good*.

"I do," he said. "Loki would have felt he had no other choice."

"Could it really have been that easy?" Bruce said. "I mean, the guy made it sound like she was so dangerous."

"She is," Thor said. "Was." *Loki is simply more dangerous.*

"He had a new weapon this time," Natasha said. "I think we all know how powerful the Aether is."

Steve sighed and looked unhappy. "I'm sure glad he's on our side."

Thor was pleasantly surprised to hear no doubt or hesitation in those words. *They trust him.* Somehow, against all odds, his little brother had earned their trust.

As they neared the golden palace, two royal guards came running up.

"My prince," one of them said, bowing, "the Allfather requests your presence at once. We will see to the comfort of your friends."

Thor just nodded, smiling reassurance to his friends before following the guard. He was not, however, escorted to the audience hall. Rather, he was brought to his father's private sitting room. The guard stopped outside and knocked before bowing once more to Thor.

"He is expecting you." He took up position right in the hall.

A bit mystified, Thor pushed the door open and strode inside. His father was standing out on the balcony, a warm summer breeze stirring the gossamer curtains slightly to the side. Odin wasn't alone as he turned to face Thor, his face younger and more peaceful than Thor could remember in . . . decades. And at his side . . .

The entire realm tilted. Had he fallen asleep? Was he in the midst of some sweetly cruel dream? Or was this a powerful hallucination brought on by shock and exhaustion? His body was moving without direction from his mind, reaching out, hand trembling. Surely, this could not be real.

"Mother?"

Frigga's gentle smile lit up her eyes. "I'm here," she murmured. "You're not dreaming." Her hands, warm and soft, cupped his face, drawing his head to rest on her shoulder as she enfolded him in her arms.

Thor's legs buckled, dragging her to the floor with him, then he was weeping. He felt Odin's strong hands grip his shoulders and squeeze, a silent offer of comfort and support. For a long time, they stayed that way, long after Thor's tears dried and he regained his composure.

Finally, he straightened and pushed her back a bit to look at her. Her summer-blue eyes were overflowing with love. "How?"

With a little laugh, she leaned up and kissed his forehead. "I should have known he wouldn't warn

you. This is Loki's doing, my darling. He made a bargain with Hel to return me to the land of the living. Neither he nor I could let go. Not just yet."

Thor couldn't begin to define what flooded up in his breast. Frustration that Loki had to be so damn secretive. Anger that he hadn't let Thor help. Resignation that he probably couldn't have helped Loki. Wry amusement that Loki had probably taken great delight in knowing how shocked Thor would be. And on top of all that, overwhelming and predominant, love. Love for a little brother too stubborn to let go. Too proud to accept fate. Clever enough to find a way to change it.

He was laughing as he pulled his mother back into his arms, new tears stinging his eyes. "Ah, Loki. Loki."

Then they were all three laughing, Odin joining the embrace at last, the reunited family clinging to each other.

Of every possible thing Loki could have given Thor, this was the one impossible thing he could never have expected. And yet, here it was. Here *she* was. Once dead. Now alive. Wonderfully *alive*.

The blissful happiness was almost too sweet to be aught but pain. Laughter tapering off into a chuckle, Thor kissed his mother's forehead.

"I'm going to kill him."

oOo

Where are we going? she asked.

"There is one more thing I must see to before I focus on Thanos," Loki replied, gazing out across the peaceful, lovely valleys of Alfheim.

Then, finally, all of this would be over.

Forty-Seventh Installment

In Norse mythology, Freyr doesn't have any children. Poetic license ahead.

Forty-Seven th Installment: Final Piece

The Ljósálfar of Alfheim bent knee to Freyr, a strong and competent leader who was Odin's closest ally. Loki had never met him, but he knew some things about the king that most others did not. Freyr was a master manipulator, capable of putting on a smile and speaking the kindest words when inside he would be spitting poison.

Not unlike Loki himself.

He will have the last Casket? the Aether asked.

"Yes," Loki said aloud. "He inherited it from his late wife. Until a few decades ago, it remained hidden in Vanaheim."

He will give it to you? she asked.

Her thought processes, Loki noted with a slight smile, were growing more coherent. She was actually putting concepts together instead of simply feeling things like *need* or *want* or *anger* or *love*. She was creeping ever closer to becoming a partner instead of a simple weapon. He reached up and touched the crystal, the most visceral way to let her feel his love for her.

"Yes," he said again, "but it will take some doing."

Though he did already have a plan. Freyr, who had lost his wife almost ten years ago, was still wrapped up in his grief over it. Even his sons could not convince him to move on and live again. Loki had a few ideas how to help the king and earn his trust and gratitude, only a slightly different approach than the one he'd used with the dwarves of Nidavellir.

The most difficult part would be convincing Freyr to part with his Casket without a physical exchange. With the dwarves, it had been easy. A trade of his skills for their services. Freyr wouldn't need anything from Loki. He was a Ljósálfar, which meant he possessed his own magic ability, and of course almost all female Light Elves did, too. Magic wasn't rare in Alfheim.

Of course, Loki thought with a smile, no mages had his unique skill set.

The Aether staff vanished, and Loki transformed into a crow. He enjoyed flying, it was always accompanied by an elation and sense of total freedom. In fact, many animal forms could provide the same. When he reached the city, he retook his Aesir form and appeared in a haze of shimmering green. All nearby Ljósálfar gave him startled looks as the Aether staff reappeared in his hand and he strode with purpose toward the royal palace.

By the time he reached it, word of his presence had arrived. Three tall, flaxen-haired royal guards were waiting, and they inclined their heads.

"Prince Loki," the one in the middle said, "King Freyr's sons are awaiting you. Please follow me."

Though Loki enjoyed far less renown than Thor, mages paid attention to their own. Freyr's sons were among the few royals in the Nine who had never treated Loki as strange for his study of magic rather than war. The staff rematerialized in his hand, a silent announcement of the sheer power he now commanded. The Aether swirled lazily inside the crystal globe, glowing black and so obviously the Aether.

The audience hall of the royal palace in Alfheim was a little smaller than that of Asgard. Instead of gold, everything was a gleaming silver with accents of white marble. The pillars in the room formed a wide walkway to the dais on which the throne rested, and they were lovely works of art with gilded leaves carved into the stone. The throne itself was empty, and the king's two sons stood in front of it.

Faðir and Fiqlvarr were both fair-haired and tall, like their father, though Fiqlvarr was slightly taller and his hair was more golden than flaxen. They were fair of face, the typical bearing of their kind, strongly reminding Loki of Frigga. There were no members of the court present, and the three royal guards all took up positions by the door as Loki strode across the floor.

Fiqlvarr, the elder, inclined his head to the Aesir. "Prince Loki. This is most unexpected. Tell me, what can the Ljósálfar do for you?"

Loki showed respect but no deference in his shallow half-bow. "I would like to speak with your father. Is King Freyr indisposed?"

The brothers shared a short look. It was Faðir who replied.

"No, but it is . . . difficult. The rumors that he has been consumed with grief are not exaggerated."

Loki smiled. "That is why I'm here. I would like to help."

Fiqlvarr's pale amber eyes narrowed. "When last I heard, you had died in Svartalfheim. When exactly did that change?"

Schooling his expression into one of total neutrality, Loki took his time before replying. "I let Thor believe me dead so I could complete a certain task without fear of hindrance."

"This task," Fiqlvarr said slowly. "Did you complete it?"

A faint smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Yes."

"That staff," Faðir said softly, "contains the Aether. I would recognize its dark taint anywhere."

Loki gave the beautiful staff a fond look. "Yes."

The look the brothers shared this time was a bit more guarded.

"May I tell my father why you've come?" Faðir asked. "Little piques his interest these days."

"I would prefer to keep my business between myself and him," Loki said, making sure his voice was polite, "though you may tell him I have come seeking to strike a bargain."

The younger gave a single nod. "I will go at once. But do not set your hopes too high."

Loki just nodded.

When he was gone, Fiqlvarr eyed the staff in open wonder. "You may decline to answer, but may I inquire about it? Some would have said it was impossible. In fact, everyone has said it's impossible

to control the Aether."

Now Loki's smile was more genuine. Faðir was Thor's age, which meant Fiqlvarr was older than them both, and Loki had always liked them. Their interactions numbered relatively few, but they'd always enjoyed hearing Loki's knowledge of magic.

Naturally, he was more powerful than both, a fact of which he did not boast. Only fools boasted.

"I would say I don't actually control her," Loki replied. "I rather formed a partnership with her."

Fiqlvarr blinked, eyes widening the slightest bit. "You speak as if it's a person."

"Where once no intelligence existed," Loki confirmed, "now resides a powerful and inquisitive mind. She was awakened by an unlikely merger with a human woman less than a year ago."

Now the elder Ljósálfar prince looked openly amazed. "I wouldn't have even thought such was possible."

The Aether, Loki mused, was similar in some ways to the lifeblood of Yggdrasil. Though different in form and function, they both enjoyed a level of power that surpassed everything else in the Nine Realms. With one major exception. The Aether had been willing to talk and listen. The essence of Yggdrasil had only wanted to swallow Loki.

In glittering, endless gold.

It was all he could do not to shudder.

Faðir returned, looking a little surprised. "Father will see you, Loki. I must say, I'm pleased he's taking an interest in something."

The two princes flanked Loki as they led him out of the audience hall and into palace corridors. At an oak chamber door, Faðir knocked once before pushing it open.

"Father?" he said. "Loki is here."

"Thank you," the only occupant said, and Loki saw him rise. "You may go, my sons."

They both gave their father a respectful bow before leaving, closing the door behind them. Loki studied the king of Alfheim. He was tall and lean, but his broad shoulders bespoke a quiet strength. His hair, elaborately braided, was a platinum blonde, straight and satin-smooth. Quite attractive, and many in the three realms of Asgard, Alfheim, and Vanaheim agreed with that sentiment.

Loki inclined his head. "A pleasure to meet you, King Freyr. I am Loki."

Freyr's eyes, a rich burnished gold, studied Loki for several moments. "I have heard many things about you," he said, taking two steps forward, "and not all of them good." He held out his hand. "I am curious as to which are accurate and which are exaggerations."

Loki placed his hand in Freyr's and was a little surprised when the king lifted it to his lips and kissed his knuckles. He allowed it. If Freyr was fascinated by him, so much the better.

"I thank you for your time," he said, only reclaiming his hand when Freyr released it.

"I was intrigued by my son's words," Freyr said, gesturing to the chairs by the crackling fire. "Pray, what bargain could Loki Odinson wish to strike with me?"

Loki idly wondered why Odin had never revealed to the Nine that he was a frost giant, the true son of Laufey. *Perhaps he would have felt more chagrined to be challenged by a blood son than an adopted one?* He discarded the thoughts as a waste of time.

"Please forgive me if I seem insensitive," he said, lowering himself into the chair opposite the king, "but I have heard the grief over the loss of your late wife has quite paralyzed you."

Freyr's eyes seemed to glaze as he turned to stare into the fire. "You are not insensitive. It is true enough. I cannot even truly say why I remain this way. There are days I think I could finally gather the pieces of my life and put them back together, but the moment I try they fall from my grasp. My sons have all but taken over leadership of the Ljósálfar. It should shame me, but even that does not make it past the grief." He leaned forward and buried his face in his palms.

Loki watched him in silence for a few seconds. "I am a skilled mage, Freyr," he said. "I can help you with your grief, if you wish."

Freyr looked up, golden eyes startled. "In what way?"

Smiling gently, Loki rested his elbows on his knees. "Everything from nudging your emotions to removing your memories. Though one is basic and the other extreme, there is little I cannot do."

The king gazed at him. "I would not give up my memories of her, no matter how much pain they cause me," he said presently. "But the other . . . how would you do this thing?"

"Think of it as gauze over a wound," Loki said with a little smirk. "It helps numb the painful edges." He paused for a moment. "Your wife died ten years ago. It is possible, even if unlikely, you are under a curse of sorts."

Now the Ljósálfar king frowned. "A curse? Impossible. Who would curse me? And why?"

"That is what I'd like to find out."

"And what would you ask of me in return?" Freyr asked.

"The Casket of Living Stone."

Freyr blinked. Then he gave a rueful smile. "By all accounts, you are as slippery with your words as an eel out of water, yet you speak to me with open candor. And it is no small trinket you request."

"I am aware of its value to you," Loki said with a single nod. "But I think all of Alfheim would agree with me when I say, you've suffered enough. You've carried the burden of your grief alone for ten years. You needn't carry it another moment. Surely you are ready to begin your life again? Find a new love? Create new memories, just as sweet and poignant as the old?"

Freyr's gaze was intense and focused as he looked into Loki's eyes. Then he blinked and looked down, raking a hand over his face. "Yes," he said softly. "I long for that daily. Perhaps I do suffer from some manner of curse. If you can help me, I will consider giving the Casket to you."

It was dangerous to make a bargain with no tangible gain, but sometimes the reward for gaining trust was continuous. So Loki just smiled. "You are most gracious. Shall we begin?"

"Before we do, I must know. How did you capture the Aether in a god's tear crystal? I was among the many who said it could not be done."

This time, Loki's smile was more mischievous. "Perhaps one day I will tell you the story." He held out his hands. "Shall we?"

Freyr looked a bit disappointed, but he didn't inquire further and clasped Loki's hands. They were larger than the Aesir's, and they were warm. Green light sprang up around them, and Loki closed his eyes to focus on the Ljósálfar king. It took about three seconds before Loki determined with alacrity, something was actually wrong with Freyr. Something magic in nature.

"Have you already found something?" the king asked.

Loki blinked, realizing he'd lost focus. "Yes. It's almost like a curse, but not malicious in nature. It's almost as if . . ."

"As if?" Freyr repeated when Loki trailed off.

Frowning, Loki looked up into the Ljósálfar king's eyes. "If I may ask, what happened just before your wife died?"

The elder blinked. "On her deathbed, she made me promise I would never forget her, but that I would move on and find love again."

Loki's eyes narrowed. "And what were you thinking at that time?"

Freyr closed his eyes. Linked as they were through Loki's seiðr, he could feel the man's emotions in complete turmoil, the first and foremost a deep pain. "I could only think that she was the only one for me. No one could replace her. How could they? She was my first love. I knew she would be my last."

Smiling faintly, Loki squeezed Freyr's hands. "Unfortunately, that is exactly what condemned you to your unending grief. In a way, you cursed yourself."

"I cursed . . . myself? How is that even possible?"

Loki lifted one shoulder in a shrug, his smile a touch wry. "Magic is a peculiar thing. It allowed my mother to remain with me after she died."

"So all this time, I've been imprisoned by my own belief that I could never get over her."

"In a word, yes," Loki confirmed.

"Can you still help me?" Freyr asked, some of the hope fading from his eyes.

"Yes," Loki said again. "It will take me some time, and it will feel strange, but when I'm done you'll be able to feel the difference."

"Is there anything I need to do?"

"Relax and try not to move," Loki instructed. "In fact, it would be best if you were lying down."

Freyr rose, relocating to the sofa. He slung his legs over the arm of the couch, lying on his back and dropping his head into Loki's lap. It startled him, but he managed not to physically react. Taking a slow, deep breath to ready himself for what he had to do, he rested one hand on Freyr's forehead and the other on his chest. This time, green seiðr flowed into the king as the god of mischief began.

Though he was in and out of true consciousness for most of it, Freyr knew it had been four hours before his unexpected savior finally finished. As the king of Alfheim slowly sat up, he put a hand to his head. After a moment, his eyes widened in amazement. He actually felt so different he put a hand to his chest, wondering if he was a new person entirely.

"How do you feel?" Loki asked.

Freyr faced him, staring into the other's face. For the first time, he noticed how beautiful a face it was. "I feel . . . I still love her. I will never stop loving her. But I don't feel as though there's a great, aching void inside me. I feel *alive* for the first time since I lost her. How could I have forgotten this feeling? I feel like I've been remade. How did you even do this?"

"I spent my entire youth studying magic and its many wonders," Loki replied with a little smile. "All I really did was encourage your body and mind to return to their natural state. Grief is natural enough, but prolonged grief is not."

Freyr rose to his feet. "I feel like I've only just remembered how to breathe." He held out a hand, pulling Loki up when the younger accepted. He bowed over it, kissing each sharp knuckle. "How can I ever repay you?"

Loki just smiled.

Freyr chuckled. "Before we discuss that further, agree to stay here the night. Let me dine with you and get to know the Odinson I have never met."

Elegant and graceful, Loki gave him a shallow bow that was exactly the right depth to show respect but not deference. "It would be an honor, Highness."

As Freyr escorted him from the sitting room, he couldn't quite believe the rumors he'd heard about Loki. Silvertongue, they called him, a devil capable of vile manipulations and eager to cause mayhem. *This gentle-mannered youth? Surely not. He is fairer than even my sons, willing to aid me even if I make no promises of recompense. Those are not the actions of a monster.*

"I was sorry to hear about your mother," he said aloud, only just noticing Loki was now wearing the Aether around his neck in a pendant. He dearly hoped that would be a story Loki would be willing to tell by night's end.

Loki gave him that gentle smile. "I appreciate your concern, but my mother is alive and well."

Freyr stopped, startled, looking down at Loki's face. "Alive? How . . . you?"

Now the smile was mischievous. "I and Hel came to an arrangement, of sorts. It wasn't Frigga's time."

"It certainly was not," the king mused, shaking his head and resuming walking. "More amazing do you become by the moment. I find myself wishing I had met you years ago. You would have been exactly the thing to distract me from my grief. Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are, Loki?"

His young guest smiled. "Once or twice." Modest but unashamed.

Freyr once more lifted Loki's hand to kiss it. "Then let me be the third."

A soft chuckle. "The tales of your kindness have not been exaggerated."

"Though it would seem the tales of your wives are," Freyr replied with a frown. "Tell me, how did it come to be that such unbecoming things are whispered of you?"

Loki's eyes went distant. "I spent too much time holding others at a careful distance," he said, sounding like he wasn't really talking to Freyr any longer.

"For fear of being hurt?" the king asked softly.

"No," Loki said, voice absent. "Not really. It's . . . complicated."

Freyr chuckled. "In general, life is complicated."

Those words made Loki focus on him again with another smile. Somehow, it looked sweeter than the previous. "Perhaps that is why lately I've been drawn to simpler things."

"A wise choice for anyone," Freyr mused. "I look forward to hearing more of your wisdom."

Loki's eyes gleamed. "I look forward to imparting it."

Forty-Eighth Installment

Forty-Eighth Installment: Unexpected

Night in Alfheim was softer than Asgard, the temperature not dropping quite as low and the night sky not seeming quite as dark. Loki stood on the balcony of the room Freyr had given him, the breeze almost warm across his skin. He'd forgone his ceremonial leather armor for a robe of dark violet silk. It had been a gift from Freyr's sons, and even the breeches he wore were silk dyed a rich black.

It felt like a cloud on his skin.

That elf, the Aether said, sounding thoughtful, *he watched you very closely all evening.*

Loki smiled faintly. "Yes, but so much the better he did. The more intrigued he becomes, the closer I get to my goal."

The Casket, she mused. *Do you like him better than your human? Stark?*

The question actually startled a laugh from him. "What brings this on?"

I don't know your human, she said, *but this Freyr seems strong.*

She sounded so contemplative. Chuckling, Loki cupped the crystal still in a pendant around his neck. It was too big for a piece of jewelry, but no one could mistake her for decoration.

"I like this inquisitive side of you," he murmured. "Never lose your desire to learn, dearest."

Instantly, glowing black flowed from the pendant to swirl around him in lazy tendrils. Her way of embracing him. Love radiated from the black, potently strong. Loki rewarded it with his own feelings for her.

A knock on the door made Loki turn his head, but he didn't ask the Aether to move. "Come in," he called.

Freyr walked into the room, closing the door behind him. He appeared a little startled by the Aether's presence, but he didn't recoil in alarm. Mostly, it was curiosity on his face.

"Simply incredible," he said, shaking his head. "Forgive me if I intrude."

"You're not," Loki assured him. "We were simply enjoying the warm night." The Aether slowly retracted to the crystal, and Loki lowered his hand to face Freyr. "Is something troubling you?"

Freyr shook his head. He was wearing a lace-up shirt of the softest blue silk. "I had thought to come bid you good night. In truth, it's a poor excuse to see you again. My sons think I am smitten with my savior."

Loki's lips curved in an indulgent smile. "Is that what you think as well, Freyr?" A hint teasing.

"We parted from dinner less than an hour ago," the king said, "and I missed you already. I would have to agree with my sons."

"You have been trapped by your grief for so long," Loki said, "you cannot wait to live again. There is nothing strange in that."

Freyr let out a soft sound of amusement. "You are as kind as you are fair. How is it I have never met you until now? Why do not your mother and father parade you about and boast of you as they should?"

At this, Loki looked away. "I am not as unguarded with everyone."

A strong hand landed on his shoulder, warm through the thin robe. Freyr gently turned him. "Stay here in Alfheim, with me," he entreated softly. "I want to learn your every expression, your every secret, your every passion and joy." He cupped Loki's chin in his free hand and leaned down. "Do this, and I will give you the Casket."

Reaching up, Loki lightly rested his hand on Freyr's wrist, not making the other move. "I cannot. There are other demands on my time, demands I cannot ignore. As pleasant as that sounds."

The king frowned. "What demands?"

Loki sighed. "A threat to Midgard I have sworn to defeat. He is known as Mad Titan."

Freyr made a rude sound. "Thanos. Yes, the mad fool who sought to ally himself with Death." He slid his hand across Loki's cheek, a soft caress. "Must you do this? Are there not others who would defend that small world?"

His slight, disdainful emphasis on *small* brought genuine amusement. *Perhaps I could have loved you, Freyr, in another time.* "It is they I have promised to aid. I cannot break my vow. Much as I would prefer your bargain."

"Then once you have slain this Mad Titan," Freyr tried again, "come back to me. Then I will give you the Casket."

With a gentle smile, Loki reached up and ran his fingers over Freyr's lips. "It is a task I may not survive," he murmured. "How could I make a promise I may not be able to keep? Thanos is not some dark elf fanatic or arrogant witch. He is strong."

Freyr abruptly captured both Loki's hands in his own and pressed his lips to both. "Marry me, Loki," he whispered. "Agree to be mine, and I will be satisfied."

Loki gazed into that handsome, open, unguarded face. "Another vow I cannot make."

"Is there someone else who holds your heart?" Freyr asked quietly.

Gently extricating his hands, Loki turned back to the soothing darkness. "You could say that." Closing his eyes, he smiled to think how Stark would react.

You could say that? the man would demand. *The correct response is, there's someone I love with all my heart, I love him more than chocolate and need him more than the air I breathe.*

The Ljósálfar king finally gave up. "Then doubly has my curse damned me. Give me one night, Loki. Then I shall resign myself that I cannot have you."

Loki smiled up at him. "That, my king, I can give."

oOo oOo

Asgard was nice. No doubt about it. The royal city was all gold and shiny and interesting. The Aesir were all way taller than Tony, but he'd kind of gotten used to that. It was formal and more

than a little pompous, and he didn't think it suited Loki at all. Stark Tower was a better fit, no matter how a guy looked at it.

Sleeping on a bed was a little strange after so long camping out, then Tony realized it hadn't been all *that* long, and that was even weirder. It felt like a year or more had passed. Before he got in bed, he undressed and stared at his reflection in the mirror for a long time.

He looked younger. His face was smoother, his eyes brighter, his step springier, his body stronger. He hadn't looked like this since his mid twenties, but he didn't look de-aged. He just looked more ageless, which was good. He didn't want to look twenty-five again. He wanted to look his age but way better. Which he did.

Weirdest of all, though, was to see his full body without the Arc reactor taking center stage in his chest. The glow that had comforted him for so long was gone, and it left a sweet ache in him.

He didn't sleep all that well.

The next day, he practiced avoidance and not thinking. The former was easy, the latter not quite as. His troubling thoughts kept straying to Thanos and the upcoming conflict that seemed inevitable. What would happen after that? When Loki no longer had any use for the Avengers? Sure, there would be other threats. But would there be long spells of time where he didn't see the guy he so idiotically loved?

"I can hear the hamster wheel in your head turning from here."

"Shit!" Tony exclaimed, heart racing as he whirled. "Stop sneaking up on me!"

With a tiny, unapologetic grin, Loki lowered himself onto a log. "What are you doing out here? I would not have taken you for a nature lover."

Tony glanced around. Honestly, he wasn't. He'd just started wandering and then couldn't seem to stop. "My head was too cluttered up to sit still."

"Confusion is not a good look on you."

"Shut up," Tony muttered, turning away. *I hate this. I feel insecure all the time.* Tony Stark did not do insecure. He made others feel that way. "Gonna tell me where the hell you went and why?"

"I visited the Ljósálfar king of Alfheim," Loki replied. "He had something I wanted."

Surprised Loki had answered, Tony looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Had?"

The grin came back, so tiny and cute. "He gave it to me, naturally."

Snorting, Tony looked away again. If he kept looking at Loki, he would start saying embarrassing things or grab him and shove him over onto the grass and do something stupid. "Why am I not surprised. One of the Caskets you've been after?"

"I'm a little surprised you remember that," Loki mused. "It isn't something I discussed with you in any detail."

Chuckling a little, Tony folded his arms, staring through the trees. "Remember a long time ago when I said I listen to everything you say? I figure that's the safest way to be near you. To always pay attention."

"That makes you sound like prey."

"If you're the predator? Yes. I'm pretty sure everyone's prey to you. So how did you do it?"

"It required a little creativity," Loki said, sounding thoughtful. "With repercussions I certainly wasn't expecting."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"A marriage proposal, for one."

Choking, Tony finally spun to face his lover. "What?"

The god of mischief was wearing a deviously pleased smile. "I thought that might recapture your attention."

"Are you just bullshitting me?"

"No, I was quite serious," Loki answered. "He asked for my hand."

"Had you even met the guy before?" Tony demanded, starting to feel like he had a Light Elf to go knock out.

"No."

"Then what the fuck! You told him no? You better have told him no."

"Of course I did," Loki said, suddenly sounding irritated. "What possible interest would I have in marrying a stranger?" His expression mellowed. "I helped him overcome an emotional trauma so powerful it had literally cursed him into impotence. He was grateful, and the strength of his gratitude expressed itself as infatuation. Nothing more."

Like it's no big deal. It's a big fucking deal to me, Tony wanted to say. *He's a king, he's a god-damn elf, he could probably keep you interested longer than I can.* Then he wanted to punch himself for being so stupid insecure.

"Stark."

Keeping his eyes fixed ahead, Tony wished the trees would impart some wisdom. This was fucking Asgard. Weren't trees supposed to be wise here?

"Anthony."

Tony jumped when a cold hand touched his arm. He turned to find gleaming emerald eyes gazing into his, and they weren't pleased.

"Jealousy," Loki said softly, "does not become you."

"I'm not jealous."

The god said nothing, merely looked at him.

Tony sighed. "Fine. But can you blame me? You're gorgeous, you're powerful, you could have anyone you wanted. Me? Sure, I'm the smartest and richest guy on Earth, but that means squat with you. That has never meant nothing before."

"Your wealth has never meant anything to me," Loki pointed out with a raised eyebrow. "Why this sudden insecurity over it?"

"Believe me, it ain't sudden," Tony muttered. He noticed he was standing on a slight rise that made him taller than Loki. They were close enough he could reach down and steal a kiss.

So he did.

Loki pulled back with a small smile. "Trying to create a mood after *that* conversation? Insatiable as always."

"Just shut up and let me kiss you," he grumbled.

With the softest chuckle, Loki obeyed. Tony fused their mouths together and watched Loki's eyes slip shut. He didn't hesitate to demand entry with his tongue, and for once Loki allowed it without making Tony work for it. He sucked and nipped at Loki's tongue, trying to decide what the other tasted like.

Then he felt something freezing cold against his chest and opened his eyes again.

"Shit!" he yelped, stumbling backward. Jesus fucking Christ, the fucking Aether was leaking from the pendant around Loki's neck. Black tendrils, thick as arms, were surrounding Loki.

Whose green eyes were glittering with invitation.

A smile unlike any Tony had ever seen crawled over Loki's face. It was dark, it was dangerous, it was a warning and a threat, a promise and a curse. It was fucking hot as hell, and it scared the shit out of Tony.

"She wants you to let her in."

"Let her in?" Tony repeated, feeling slightly hysterical.

"Into your body."

With that astonishing declaration, Tony decided Loki was legitimately insane. "The *fuck* does that mean? Why the *fuck* . . . ?" He couldn't even finish.

"She loves me," Loki said like that wasn't the freakiest thing in the galaxy, "and she wants to know what it feels like to be inside *me*."

The implications of that went rushing southward so fast, proving to Tony irrevocably that when it came to Loki he was a giant fucking idiot who could only think with his . . .

"So she can . . . feel me *fuck* you?" he said, now definitely sounding hysterical.

Loki's slight glare said he didn't care for the wording. "If you must be so vulgar." He closed the distance between them, his lips skimming over Tony's cheekbone. "I am curious, too. It would be interesting . . . to have you so much stronger."

Aaaaaaaaaand there was the clincher.

"Tell her come on in."

Forty-Ninth Installment: Interlude

Forty-Ninth Installment: Interlude: Hold Me Down

Tony had been through a lot of weird things in his life, some dreadful, some pleasant, some surprising. Being invaded by the fucking Aether was the weirdest. The sensation was shocking, somehow freezing cold, and it took his breath away. Literally couldn't breathe. It felt like something too big for his skin had nudged its way inside him, sharing a space meant only for one.

Then the sensation passed, and while Tony was still aware of it, it wasn't quite so strange. Except for one little thing.

He could hear a female voice in his head. Except, he couldn't *hear* anything because it was only in his head, but because Loki had kept calling the Aether 'she', he associated the sensation of it talking as a female, and so that's what he 'heard'. And it felt like she was poking him all over, getting to know him. One thing became apparent right way.

She loved Loki almost as much as Tony did. She would destroy absolutely anything, from buildings to towns to cities to worlds to protect him. She wanted the best for him, and that included his partner. Even though it was freaky as hell to know how powerful she was, it was less than ten seconds before she clearly said in his mind,

"I like you. You're better for him than that Freyr."

Tony glared down at Loki. "Who the hell is Freyr?"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "I told you not ten minutes ago. The king of Alfheim."

"You didn't tell me his name," Tony grumbled. *So you think I'm better for Loki than this punk Light Elf. Hmf. I like you, too.*

Definite laughter. *"He was all soft and gentle with Loki. You won't be, will you?"* She was practically purring.

Tony blinked. "Wait, are we talking about sex?" he said aloud without thinking.

Loki's lips quirked in a smile. "No, she wasn't. I may not be above chaos and destruction, but I am rather discriminating when choosing bedfellows."

Not bothering to ask how Loki had heard the Aether, he lowered his head to bring their mouths back together. "Good." Then, while all but biting Loki's lips, "Was I the first man to claim this?" His hands oh-so-rudely grabbed Loki's ass. Considering he hadn't told them to do that, it *was* rude.

"Yes," Loki said, honesty surprising Tony, and contemplation entered his verdant eyes. "Shall we switch positions?"

Tony had never been with a man at all, so the idea of taking instead of giving was a little weird. He shrugged. "Sure. But not right now." He leaned down again.

Chuckling quietly, Loki accepted the kiss.

Stark was like an animal in heat, rubbing himself all over Loki as if he intended to scent-mark him, and he was being very handsy and mouthy. He kept sucking and biting Loki all over.

Loki couldn't move. Stark's whole body had coiled around him, and for the first time it wasn't about him allowing the human to touch or hold him. He couldn't do anything. The Aether had lent Stark a strength so potent even Loki's couldn't rival it. It was strange to be at his mercy. Strange, and more than a little exciting. He could use magic to remove himself from the situation, of course, but it was easier to pretend he couldn't when his physical power wasn't enough.

If the Aether decided to prevent Loki from using magic, too . . . well, he wasn't at all sure he could stop that.

He trusted her never to do that unless he really wanted it, and even that was exhilarating. That the possibility existed was somehow . . . delicious.

From where he had his teeth latched onto Loki's neck, Stark grunted something that sounded like, "Tie him down."

Glowing black ribbons oozed from the human's body, and Loki hissed when the cold dark slid around him, pinning his arms above his head. His heart started to race (anxiety? excitement?) when he couldn't move. Not an inch, and without thinking he tried to escape.

Don't. Don't. Allow him. Allow us.

Stark's mouth wandered down his torso, teeth nibbling at taut belly muscles and placing stinging nips over a sharp hipbone. A warm (hot) hand gripped behind his knee and lifted up. Loki stared blankly up when that rude mouth landed on his inner thigh. Gently, now. He merely sucked on that sensitive skin, and Loki knew it would leave a mark.

He's marking me.

"You're hard. I haven't even touched you yet."

Loki tried to suck in a breath when a prickly, stubbly cheek rubbed against his arousal, only he hadn't exhaled yet so he couldn't. Eyes wide and unseeing, his entire body tensed in something between alarm and mindless bliss when Stark's lips closed around the head of his arousal and sucked.

He'd been alive a long time. Compared to a human, he'd lived a *long* time. Never in his life had he *ever* allowed anyone to touch him like this. Never had he been disallowed to protest. He realized he was panting as that mouth descended on him, and damn him, Stark was *still* using his teeth. They were lightly grazing sensitive skin now, but it was distracting. A sensation bordering sweetly on pain, a promise not delivered upon.

Since his legs weren't bound, Loki managed to lift the one not held in Stark's hand and dug his heel into the man's shoulder. Stark hummed.

Loki's head snapped back, eyes squeezing closed as the sound caused vibrations to travel all the way from the base of his skull to the tips of his toes.

"Stark . . ." he gasped.

The hum changed to something more like a growl, and Stark's free hand squeezed the base of Loki's arousal a little too tightly.

Loki almost laughed. "Anthony," he corrected himself, low and sweet.

Now almost a purr. Loki pulled against the Aether's bonds, enjoying the cold on his arms, the heat between his legs, the not-quite-pain of the tight binding, and the complete and utter helplessness. And, of course, the pleasure. That was hard to forget, building up as it was.

Stark abruptly pulled off and half sat up. It bent Loki back to an interesting position, given that his leg was still slung over the man's shoulder. His pupils had almost swallowed up the dark brown, giving them the appearance of being black. He'd never seen him looking more dark, more dangerous, or more in control. It sent a shudder through Loki's skin.

Stark didn't miss it.

"You're excited by this," he murmured, and somehow he looked like a predator who'd just spotted a lame fawn, "being at my mercy."

Considering how difficult it was to render Loki helpless, he wasn't above admitting to enjoying the loss of control. It was more exciting than anything he'd yet experienced. Academic pursuits had always prevented him from exploring sexuality, and he found Stark to be a worthy teacher.

An interesting role for him to fill.

So Loki allowed himself to completely give up control. He bit his lower lip. "It's a first for me."

He hadn't thought Stark's pupils could dilate further, but they did. The desire in his face was palpable, and it thrummed between them. He surged down to reconnect their mouths, bending Loki in half. He moaned faintly into the kiss, perfectly willing to see how far Stark would go.

oOo

Tony had been called a sexual predator before. Being rather indiscriminate in choosing bedfellows meant he'd been with women who wanted just about everything. Wanting to be in control. Wanting to lose control. BDSM, S&M, vanilla sex, spicy sex, fun sex, playful sex, weird sex, and anything else imaginable.

Tying his partner down and taking control wasn't new.

Tying down Loki and taking control was new.

It was only something Tony had hoped for in his wildest, most secret fantasies. Surely, he'd reasoned, Loki would never give him that. The prickly bastard would never let go enough to be this vulnerable. And yet, here he was, naked and unable to move, trapped by a force even he couldn't deny.

The fact that the god of mischief could still end this only made it all the sweeter, because Loki was *allowing* it. Completely and utterly giving up control, voluntarily. That was so, *so* much better than physically overpowering him. It made Tony want to devour him.

His skin was warm, hot even. Loki's skin was cool. The Aether was cold. Tony could tell his lover was enjoying the contrast between Tony's touch and the Aether's, and he caressed Loki's thin waist. His hands quickly slid behind him, cupping that perfect ass and lifting.

"Want me to be gentle?" he purred, "or want it rough?"

Loki, who was already being held in about the most awkward position imaginable, still managed to

lean up and bite Tony's lower lip so hard it started bleeding. His eyes, normally so verdant green, had been made nearly black, pupils blown wide by desire. His expression clearly said,

Don't ask me. I gave you control.

"He will heal very quickly," the Aether piped up in his head.

Yeah, it was still weird to hear her chip in.

Reaching down, Tony grabbed Loki's bound wrists and yanked them up, the Aether obedient to his wishes. He draped Loki's arms around his neck, rocking them both up into a sitting position. With a half-thought to the Aether to make sure this worked, he hooked his arms under Loki's knees and let gravity pull the god down onto him.

Loki's head snapped back, something like a strangled groan forced past his lips.

The heat was incredible. The pressure was intense. The friction was mind-numbing. The pleasure was insane. And Loki's raw, sexy beauty was breathtaking. Tony felt half-mad with his own desire, wanting things he couldn't even quite define. He let go of Loki's legs and rolled onto his back. It was a good thing his lover was so flexible, his arms were still bound around Tony's neck. The change in position meant he was now laying on top of Tony.

He turned his head to nibble at Loki's ear. "Move." A command, not a request.

They were so close there was no missing the shiver that passed through Loki's body. And because of the awkward position he couldn't do much more than grind himself up and down, more gyrating his hips than thrusting them. Tony practically groaned to feel Loki's hard length trapped between their bellies, already slick and weeping.

This was the sexiest thing he'd ever done in his entire life. His hands gravitated back to Loki's ass, stroking, squeezing, spreading. It caused Loki to clench around him, and he hissed at the feel.

Loki made a sound half moan, half gasp. "Stark . . ."

Tony was half tempted to slap his ass in punishment for not using his first name, but he didn't quite dare. Giving up control was one thing. Indignity was another. It still made him grin as he continued to bite at Loki's ear.

"Tony," he corrected, squeezing the delectable flesh in his hands.

Made him want to take a bite.

"Mm, idiot," Loki purred.

Yeah, he was still Loki.

"Fuck I love you."

"So you've said."

"Shut up and move like you mean it."

"Then let go of my arms," Loki suggested, sounding a tad breathless.

"No. I like you all tied up and at my mercy."

"Stark . . ."

Growling, Tony sat up and in a dizzying whirl flipped Loki onto his elbows and knees, himself right above the other. He pushed his knees between Loki's thighs, spreading them as wide as he could before plunging back inside him. Loki rewarded the rough entry with a low, *faint* moan. Those little sounds made Tony crazy. He wanted so much more! He stayed on hands and knees, giving him the perfect leverage to set a fast, punishing rhythm. One which Loki didn't hesitate to meet.

It wasn't all that surprising, that they didn't last as long as that incredible night in Nidavellir. Even though he knew Loki didn't like stimulation front and back to reach orgasm, Tony still wanted to reach around and touch him. He couldn't make himself slow down enough to do so. Conscious as ever of his partner's pleasure, he made sure to keep every thrust aligned with Loki's prostate. He'd memorized exactly what angle was needed to keep the pressure on it. He knew how much Loki loved that.

Climax stole over Loki with little more than a gasp, clenching around Tony. Tony didn't relent or slow, driving forward to fuck Loki through his orgasm. It made him moan. That faint, sexy little moan. He kept going until he felt Loki's body going limp beneath him, and he came with a groan that he buried in Loki's neck. He didn't stop until the glittering aftershocks of pleasure were almost too much.

"Stark." Soft.

"Will you call me by my first name already?"

"We should return to the city," Loki ignored him.

As usual. "Why?" Petulant. He would need only another minute before he could go again.

"My brother will be wanting to see me. I have a promise to keep."

"He can wait," Tony grumbled, nuzzling Loki's neck. "He didn't miss you as much as I did."

He gasped when cold suddenly spiked through him, and when the sensation passed, Loki was lying on his back. The Aether had returned to her home. Loki was wearing only a sweet and teasing smile. Reaching up, he cupped Tony's cheek.

"Will you make a liar of me?"

"There are better uses for your talented tongue," Tony said without thinking.

Loki just laughed. "There will be a time when we'll have all the opportunity you could desire for activities such as these, Stark. You need only be patient until then." So saying, he vanished and reappeared, fully clothed and un-disheveled.

Bastard. "Patience isn't my strongest suit, princess," he muttered, getting up. *Didn't even let me enjoy the afterglow.*

"Then we shall have to take the fight to our enemy," Loki said, "that we might end the threat that much sooner."

A plan much more to Tony's liking. He waved a hand. "Go on to your family. I'll be there as soon as I find my pants."

With a faint chuckle, Loki disappeared. Tony sighed and donned his clothing once more. He didn't immediately follow. His thoughts still troubled him. He'd always been romantic enough to think for the right people, love was enough.

That was before Loki. *I love him. He's what I want. For the rest of whatever life I have.*

And for Loki, he wasn't at all sure it was enough.

Fiftieth Installment

Fiftieth Installment: Calm Before the Storm

It was a little strange to be back in Stark Tower. It felt like a decade had passed, and while Loki wouldn't call this place home by any stretch, it was somehow good to be here again. It felt peaceful and even a little safe. As soon as they were in Stark's 'war council' room, the human pointedly looked Loki up and down.

Rolling his eyes, Loki nevertheless waved his hand. His ornate leather armor disappeared, replaced now with a pair of snug-fitting jeans and a form-fitting sweater of a smokey purple hue so dark it was almost black. An ensemble which prompted the man to give him a look full of appreciation.

"Jarvis, scan the tower for bugs," Stark said into his helmet.

"Scanning, sir," the AI's voice said.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "The same program runs your suit and your tower. If it has been compromised, don't you think it wouldn't know?"

Stark's eyes turned to him, and they were full of ridiculous pride. "Damn you catch on to our tech quick, you know that? Clever, princess, but no worries. I downloaded Jarvis' core program into my suit and isolated it from my tower mainframe. The "Jarvis" running here is a decoy. An incomplete version. I didn't want SHIELD snooping."

Loki wanted to be irritated, but he wasn't. In fact, he was even smiling. A teeny, tiny smile, but still a smile.

"Well, thank god for your foresight," Natasha said, flopping gracefully down onto a chair and kicking her feet up onto the table.

"The decoy program has several bugs, sir," Jarvis announced.

"Bastards," Stark grumbled. "All right, let's give them a helluva show." He trotted over to room's extensive computer console.

Curious, Loki followed him. "What do you plan to do?" he inquired.

Stark looked over at him (and Loki realized he was standing much closer than necessary to the human) with a smug grin. "I'm gonna download Jarvis back into my mainframe. Only, I've tweaked his programming a little. He's going to act like a giant virus and follow the signal all the way back to SHIELD. It will take them days to recover from the spectacular crash. Hell, maybe weeks. A guy can hope."

Blinking, Loki gazed back at Stark, feeling something between confusion and alarm. *Has he gotten . . . taller? His eyes are nearly on a level with mine.*

"I like him," the Aether piped up. *"I like him a lot. He's fun. He loves you. I love him for that."*

Her stay in Stark's body and mind had greatly accelerated her awakening, and it was amusing to hear her use language like Stark would use.

"And did he ask you to make him taller?" he asked her, wondering if that was even possible.

"No, but he wanted it," she said. *"He doesn't like feeling he's not your equal."*

Loki snorted softly. "Intelligent and vindictive," he said to the human. "No wonder we have a rapport."

Stark blinded him with a million-suns smile. "We have a lot more than that, princess." Low, for Loki's ears alone.

He rolled his eyes again, but he felt no real irritation. In fact, he felt only content.

When Stark was done fooling around with Jarvis, he grabbed Loki's arm and steered him to the table. "So, we should come up with a game plan for this Thanos fellow."

"I want to know more about the witch," Rogers said, drumming fingers on the table. "Was killing her really necessary?"

Loki lowered himself into a comfortable chair. To his surprise, he actually felt . . . well, not guilty. No, he felt a sort of compassion for the soldier. Wasn't that amazing.

"No prison could hold her," he told the captain. "She would have escaped and continued. You only have my word for this, but her crimes numbered many and despicable. Even if you feel I am not qualified to be judge and executioner, trust me when I say she should have been dead long ago."

Rogers' blue eyes gazed into his for a few moments, intense and focused. What he sought, Loki didn't know. Then he nodded once.

"I trust you."

Actually managing to startle Loki.

"Are we sure she's dead?" Natasha asked. "You gods are hard to kill."

Loki flashed her a tiny smirk. "You can be sure. I did not kill her." He touched the pendant around his neck, causing it to flare bright green and the ebony within to swirl.

Thor eyed the pendant with no small amount of trepidation. "Even she could not have survived that."

The Aether all but purred. *"Easier than squashing a bug."*

Guard already lowered by these fool humans, Loki couldn't help the soft snort of laughter. Then, at the looks he received, waved a hand and leaned back. "I apologize. She has yet to learn a few social graces. The witch is well and truly dead. Thanos is very much alive."

"What about Surtr?" Banner asked.

Loki shook his head. "Not a threat. He could no more act without the witch than a fish could sprout wings and fly. He is too afraid of Thanos to rekindle that alliance. And he would never dare challenge me and Thor by himself. Not after what I did to Laufey."

Earning him a semi dark look from Thor.

"Who's Laufey?" Rogers asked.

"He was the Frost Giant king," Thor replied, eyes not leaving Loki's face.

"Was?" Stark repeated.

"I killed him," Loki said, a little surprised to find he was no longer proud of that fact. Ashamed by it? Certainly not. But it no longer brought him the satisfaction it once had.

A silence fell that felt uncomfortable. Loki let it remain, amused to find it still pleased him to render people speechless.

Rogers broke it, clearing his throat and shifting. "So, Thanos."

Smiling inwardly, Loki took pity on them. "I'm sure you all remember what happened when that fool dark elf came to Midgard. Thanos wants something similar. Actually, Miss Foster's help would be indispensable, Thor. Her knowledge of astronomical phenomena would aid me greatly in predicting his next actions."

"I'll get her here," Stark piped up.

The Aether stirred. She remembered Jane Foster. Loki idly stroked the pendant.

"What allies does Thanos have?" Rogers asked.

"The Chitauri, for one," Loki said, "though you destroyed more than three-fourths of that army." He smirked, still pleased by how well his plan had worked. "I have had no interaction with him in ten months, so how he has recovered from that blow is as much a mystery to me as you."

"Is he gonna care that you iced the witch?" Barton asked.

"No," Loki replied. "If I know Thanos, he will likely believe she deserved to die. He was fond of saying, if you cannot win then you deserve your defeat."

He wondered how it had felt to the Mad Titan, having to eat those words.

"We need to find him," Rogers said. "Is there a way to do that, Loki?"

"No," Loki said again. "Unlike the witch, Thanos doesn't leave a trail behind him."

"Then we force him out of hiding," Thor said.

"Well," Loki said, tapping his lips in contemplation, "we do know what he wants. If we unsealed the doorways here in Midgard, it would draw him out. It would also provoke a dangerous conflict, and humans are such delicate creatures."

Natasha's eyes met his, glittering in wicked delight. He had the ridiculous urge to wink at her, so he did. She laughed.

"Pathetic as it is," she agreed, "I don't think humanity is up to another alien incursion in the sky."

"I'm not up to that," Stark grumbled. "Never met an alien I liked. 'cept for two, I guess." And he sent Loki a lovesick smile.

The sweet fool.

"We could *weaken* one or two of the Allfather's seals," Loki said. "That would be a bit less obvious than removing them. Thanos will still suspect a trap, but it would be too tempting a lure to resist."

Rogers nodded, he and Thor looking at each other.

"With Miss Foster's help," Loki added, "we could pick a doorway that's in a more remote area. To help lessen the damage to innocent bystanders."

The good captain gave him a look full of gratitude.

Stark smacked his hands on the table and stood. "Right. Since we're in agreement, I'll go make arrangements to bring Jane here."

Thor rose, too. "May I speak with you in private a moment, brother?"

Surprised, but no longer dreading those words as much, Loki stood and simply nodded.

oOo

Thor led the way out of the big main room, remaining silent as he strode down the long halls. In fact, he didn't speak until he was up on the roof and Loki faced him with an expression growing more impatient by the second. His lips curved up without permission. He was finding it difficult to remember the anger and resentment he'd felt toward Loki for so long. The young Aesir standing before him wasn't a murdering liar.

He was the impatient, cynical, intelligent boy who had been and would always be the beloved little brother Thor had lost twice and found twice. He would never lose him again.

"What, Thor?" Loki finally demanded. "If you look at me like that much longer, your eyes are going to turn into molten syrup and melt out of your fool skull."

"You accuse me of sentiment," Thor said with a chuckle, "and yet, look at you. You brought our mother back." He knew his mischievous brother had probably enjoyed the thought of shocking Thor with that little gem by not saying anything.

Loki gave him a sour look that for the first time in too long lacked any malice. It was the look of a younger brother exasperated by an older brother.

"Please tell me you're not about to start weeping again."

Laughing, Thor grabbed Loki by the collar and yanked him into a rough embrace. "I was not weeping, brother."

"You were weeping like a maiden on her wedding night," Loki grunted, pushing at Thor's chest.

Thor released him, still grinning. His mirth tempered a bit. "I have something to ask of you."

Loki smoothed his dark sweater. "You would like me to imbue Miss Foster with the same regenerative power I granted our companions."

One day, he would stop being shocked by how quick-thinking Loki was. "Yes, actually."

Green eyes met sky blue, and Thor wondered what his little brother was searching for. Then Loki lifted one shoulder in a graceful, lazy shrug.

"Very well. If she has no complaints, neither do I."

Thor blinked. "That's it? No bargain? No demanding something of me in return?"

"If you wish to make a bargain, I'm certain I could think of something," Loki said, the glimmer in his eyes both teasing and a warning.

Holding up his hands, Thor shook his head. "No, I will accept your willingness with heartfelt thanks."

A pause. "You wish to spend the rest of your life with her, then?"

There was something hesitant and uncertain in Loki's voice, which surprised Thor a bit. "Yes," he replied. He meant it.

Loki's eyes searched his again. "And does it not occur you may grow tired of her one day?"

Though Loki had oft accused Thor of being a fool or an idiot (and sometimes he was), he understood immediately why Loki was asking. And though he wanted to reassure his brother about him and Stark, he knew he couldn't. Loki would reject anything he said, which would have the opposite effect Thor wanted.

So he just smiled. "How could I? You have met her. I believe her inquisitive mind will keep us both yearning for the rest of our lives. Her mortality has already taught her to live life fiercely and with all her heart. How could I tire of that?"

Judging by Loki's focus, he was intently weighing those words. "I suppose you're right," he said after a long, long moment. "And it's none of my business, anyway. Though I cannot be as certain she will not tire of *you*, being ever so much the smarter one."

Thor took a half-hearted swing at his brother, chuckling, and Loki easily danced out of reach with a wicked smirk. Then, perhaps he'd had enough for now, because he disappeared in a haze of green smoke. Thor, still smiling, just gazed out over the city.

"Thank you, Loki."

ooo ooo ooo

Jane was excited to be back at the Tower. Since her last visit had been cut shorter than she'd expected, she couldn't wait to continue her lessons with Loki. She couldn't help but be flattered that once again, he was the one who wanted her there. Needed her expertise.

And icing on an already perfect cake, Thor was there. As soon as he saw her, a smile broke over his handsome (seriously, how could anyone be so handsome?) face. Two steps took him to her side, and he swept her up into his powerful arms as though she weighed nothing.

"I missed you," he murmured in her ear.

She squeezed him back. "I missed you, too. When are you going to stop sending me away for months at a time?"

"Soon," he said, and the promise in his voice made her pull back to look at him.

"Soon?"

He smiled. "I have something to ask you, when you are settled."

Hopefully it's 'Will you marry me?' The very thought made her blush. And she definitely didn't want to wait in suspense. "Ask me now."

Chuckling, he lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. "While we were gone, Loki revealed an ability I did not know he possessed. To protect our fellow Avengers, he imbued them with

regenerative magic. It had the added benefit of increasing their lifespans."

Her heart started to race, hoping he was about to ask—

"How do you feel about having the same done to you?"

—that. "I guess that depends."

"On?"

"If I'm going to live for eight centuries instead of eight decades, how many of those centuries will I be spending with you?"

"As many as you should desire," he replied, touching his forehead to hers.

"Good," she said. "But just so you know, I can be pretty demanding."

He chuckled. "I look forward to it."

Thor led her to the same room where she'd had her first civil encounter with Loki. He was already there, and he wasn't alone. Jane stopped short when she crossed the threshold, startled by the scene waiting for her. Loki was sitting in a chair, body arranged in a carelessly elegant sprawl. Tony Stark was leaning against the desk right in front of him, arms folded loosely.

Fairly innocuous. Almost innocent.

But Jane Foster was a very observant woman. One could even say, intuitive. There were little things, almost invisible things, that she noticed.

Tony's right leg was placed a bit farther from his body, and it was touching Loki's left just above the ankle. The man's dark brown eyes flicked from Loki's eyes to his mouth, and a subtle shift of his hips told Jane he was thinking of, well, if not straight-up sex, his thoughts were certainly physical.

And Loki's mouth wore a barely visible smirk, telling her he was very aware of the effect he was having on the human.

They're lovers, was what the scene screamed to her.

Wow, that's officially the weirdest thing I've ever thought. She dismissed the notion. Surely not. Stark couldn't be that insane, and Loki couldn't be that irresponsible.

Could they?

All this took about two seconds to process in her brain, and Tony looked up. He smiled at her. "Welcome back, cutie."

A flirtatious greeting that garnered no response at all from Loki. In fact, he completely ignored Stark as he rose, all liquid grace, and walked to her. She accepted the hand he offered, and he kissed her knuckles.

"Did my brother tell you his hopes for the future?"

"Yes," Jane said, smoothing her hair a bit. "We can talk about that soon. Right now, you need my help with my astronomical research?"

He smiled. "Yes. Before we get to that, however, I too have a request. Stark, brother, if we could be alone."

Now insanely curious, Jane waited as the other two men left. Loki closed the door, and for some reason Jane only just noticed the large pendant around his neck. It looked gaudy at first glance and suited him not, too big for such delicate features. Then she really *noticed* it, and it was definitely not decorative. She could feel the power emanating from it, and she could see the ebony light swirling within.

She shuddered, knowing without a word what she was sensing. Something she could never forget. Something she'd never thought to see again.

"The Aether."

Loki's smile was all the confirmation she needed.

"Yes. Have no fear, she is not dangerous. Not unless I wish her to be."

His tone, too dark to be mischievous, wasn't comforting. "She?"

"It is how she views herself," Loki explained.

Jane blinked. "What?" She distinctly remembered having that invasive energy inside her, and it hadn't possessed a *personality*.

"She would like to explain everything to you herself," Loki said, taking a step closer. "And to thank you."

"Thank me?" Jane repeated, her voice weaker than she would have liked.

"Yes. You began it, Miss Foster. In a way, she feels beholden to you. You have nothing to fear." His cold hand gently clasped hers, his eyes glittering, his voice hypnotic. He curled her fingers around the pendant.

She was falling. Falling into endless, empty, frigid black. She wanted to scream. She wanted to flail, to right herself, to fight her way out.

Blink.

No, she wasn't falling. Something caught her. The embrace was cold, but it wasn't threatening. She could still see. A ribbon of ebony light had reached her on a path of shimmering green.

You were the one. You caused what he calls the spark. He awakened me, but you began it.

Loki. The presence was talking about Loki with so much love and reverence that Jane felt heavy with it. But a piece of that love was reserved for . . .

You. You began it. You made this possible. I will always be grateful to you. I wish to give you something to express my gratitude.

Jane realized she wasn't being held, she was being *embraced*. A hug. An affectionate gesture. The icy cold still would not allow her to breathe, and for several mind-numbing moments it intensified. Then, so suddenly she would have fallen to her knees had Loki not caught her, it was over and she was back in the room.

Loki watched her with a small smile.

"What was *that*?" Jane demanded, taking a shaky breath.

"She gave you some manner of power," Loki replied. "Everyone reacts to magic differently, so I cannot say for sure, but I suspect you will grow into it quickly."

Jane stared at him, not sure if she was more angry, shocked, or horrified. She settled on angry, because that was less frightening. She slapped him as hard as she could.

"Don't just decide things on your own!" she snapped.

The force of her blow rocked his head to the side, and he straightened with a smirk. She could feel laughter, but whether it was from him or the Aether, she did not know.

Fifty-First Installment

Fifty-First Installment: Rumbling in the Distance

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"It certainly seems to be within the realm of your physical capabilities, given that you just *did* ask me something."

"Ha ha, very funny. *May* I ask you something, damn bastard."

"You may, but I may exercise my right not to answer."

"I'm revoking that right."

Loki finally looked up from his enormous, dusty book (seriously, where the hell did he keep finding those?) and met Tony's eyes. He looked amused. "You are, are you? And what gives you *that* right?"

"You're in my Tower."

Loki's eyes glittered. "Easily rectified."

"Loki."

The beautiful Aesir twitched, closing his book and setting it down. "Not now," he said, and he made as if to walk away.

Tony grabbed his wrist. "Don't dismiss me."

Neither resisting nor pulling away, Loki merely looked at him. "It wasn't a dismissal. Think of it as a request, if you prefer. I don't want to talk about this right now."

"Why not?" Did he sound too pouty?

Something flickered in Loki's eyes. Such pretty, pretty eyes. He was thinking about lying. *When did I start reading him so well?* Finally, Loki blinked and lifted one slim, elegant hand to trace his fingers across Tony's jaw. He brushed a thumb right below Tony's left eye. *I'm tall as him now, just like the Aether promised.*

"Because I'm not ready." Then, as soon as Tony thought about opening his mouth to protest, Loki pressed a finger over his lips. "But I will be."

Tony gazed at him, just those simple words feeling incredibly meaningful. A potent promise, lingering in the air between them. Then Loki dropped his hand.

"I forgot to tell you, Miss Potts was here not twenty minutes ago, asking you to speak with her. A video conference, I believe were her words."

Tony had no idea where he was going, but he found he couldn't move as he watched him walk away. His skin tingled where Loki had touched him. Shaking himself, resigning himself to be patient *again*, he trotted to his lab.

"Jarvis, call up Pepper for me."

"Of course, sir."

It only rang twice before her pretty face, one he still loved very much, popped up on his screen. "Should I be concerned?" she asked, a smile teasing her lips.

He raised an eyebrow. "Probably. Definitely, in fact. About what?"

"You just got organized all of a sudden. Changing around the terms of Stark Industries if something were to happen to you? You've never cared about that before. Did something change?"

"Oh yeah," Tony mused. "How about that. I guess I just want to make sure you're fine if I die."

"That was never the concern," Pepper said with a low laugh. "You would never be fine if *I* died."

"True," Tony agreed, wishing he had a nice malt whiskey in his hand. "This bad guy I told you about, he's bad news. That's all."

"Are you worried?" she asked softly.

"Nah," Tony replied, waving a hand. And he wasn't. "I just got bored, had some time on my hands. Haven't you been bothering me to take care of this for months?"

"Well, I wasn't expecting you to actually do it."

He smirked. "Glad to know I can still surprise you."

She chuckled. Then her mirth mellowed. "You seem a little down. You okay?"

Flopping into a chair, Tony propped his feet on the console and looked up at the ceiling. "Yeah, I think so."

"Wanna talk about it?"

After a moment of indecision, Tony came to the surprising realization that yeah, he did want to talk about it. "I'm in love. It's harder than I remember. Loki isn't like you. He doesn't tell me he loves me and make me feel all safe about my position in his heart. He's mean and won't even let me talk. *Me*, I'm the one wanting to talk. How the hell did that happen?"

She listened, and no judgment crossed her face, but her expression was a bit guarded as she tucked a strand of honey-blonde hair behind her ear. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Pretty sure," Tony said with a frown. "Why?"

"It's just . . . he did try to kill you."

"Huh," Tony said, folding his hands and tapping his fingers together. "I forgot about that."

"You forgot?" Pepper repeated, and she sounded amused again. "For the smartest guy I know, you sure can be an idiot."

"He tells me that all the time," Tony said, wondering if he pouted it would work on her. "Why do I love people who abuse me?"

"You make it too easy," she teased.

He huffed. "Well, he wasn't really trying. To kill me."

"Oh yeah? How do you figure?"

"I'm still alive."

She laughed out loud. "Oh, Tony."

Feeling reassured somehow, Tony folded his hands behind his head. "How are things going with you and that idiot?"

"Which idiot?"

He blinked. "There's more than one?"

She grinned. "You should know, since you keep pushing them at me."

"Hey, I just want to make sure you're happy."

"Kept busy, more like."

He shrugged.

The silence that fell wasn't uncomfortable, and it only lasted a moment. "Will you promise me something?"

"Sure."

"Make sure Tony isn't left behind."

Blinking, he looked at her. Her gentle eyes were filled with warm affection. It would never not get to him, probably. "Sure thing, doll."

She put two fingers to her lips, like she had always done, and pressed them to the screen. "Take care of yourself."

The screen went black. Tony stared at it for a long, long time. "You, too."

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"I think here would be best," Jane said, pointing to the digital map on one of Stark's amazing 'screens'.

Thor still had no real idea how they worked, but his little brother had seemed to grasp human technology in the blink of an eye. Loki studied the map with narrowed green eyes.

"That is Wyoming, unless I'm mistaken?"

Geography, too, it would seem.

"Yes," Jane said. "There are stretches of open desert that span hundreds of miles with no civilization in sight. My research has suggested there's one right in this area." She gestured.

She had changed, somehow, Thor thought. She stood right next to Loki without fear. For such a petite woman, she carried herself powerfully with great confidence. *She would be a magnificent queen*, the thought flitted through his mind. It was obvious in her body language she was not afraid of Loki, though equally obvious was how she respected him.

Possibly even liked him.

For the first time, Thor suddenly contemplated the future. *I will marry Jane. Perhaps Father will even come to accept her as the next queen of Asgard. And Loki will be with Stark. Spending time here? Exploring the Nine?* He could easily see Stark's curiosity about the cosmos translating into a case of wanderlust. And Loki loved to impart his knowledge on the thirsty.

Truly, they were a perfect match. If only Loki would allow Stark into his heart.

He tuned into the discussion. "Do we need Father to weaken the seals, Loki?"

"No," his little brother said, flicking him a glance. "I'm not going to actually weaken it, I'm just going to make it appear that way. Besides, not even Father could remove the seals by himself. It took him and his father to raise them in the first place. Unless Thanos has discovered some fantastic new power, even he cannot remove them."

"Then are we sure this will work?" Steve inquired, frowning a little.

Loki gave the impression of shrugging without moving his shoulders. "It doesn't have to. All we're doing is drawing Thanos out into the open. Once I have done that, the rest is up to you." He looked at each of the Avengers in turn.

Stark raised an eyebrow. "You're not going to help us fight?"

A point Thor had been wondering himself.

His little brother lifted his chin a bit. "If I must, I will aid you."

"How generous," Stark said, sounding both amused and exasperated.

Exactly how Thor felt.

Jane grinned.

oOo

"They are unruly, and therefore cannot be ruled."

That was what the Other had said about humans. I have found that to be true. An amusing moniker. Unruly. Like wild, savage little things, like ants scurrying about their hills. Surprisingly feisty when they have need to be, mindless at other times. Never unpredictable, never dangerous.

Would you agree, Loki?

You, however . . . You are not unruly, are you? No, you are not wild and chaotic. You are not like a hateful monsoon, breaking with all its might against an unlucky shore. You are the slow, quiet buildup before the storm. The slight drop in temperature. The slight mist of rain. The stillness of the air. The whisper of the breeze. Methodical. Careful. You analyze everything very carefully.

You manage to be one step ahead, even when it would seem you are floundering twenty steps behind. You tricked that fool witch into lowering her guard not once, not twice, but three times. So clever. So, so clever.

You are the key, aren't you? I had thought I had the answer. It seems I was focusing in all the wrong directions. If I had paid but a bit closer attention to you back then, you would not have outwitted me. Crafty little snake. I am not easy to manipulate. Yet you did. Even in your madness,

you tricked me.

Perhaps your very madness is what tricked me.

"Master? Are you ready?"

"Yesss . . ." A low rumble. A hiss. A purr.

This time, I will be the one, Loki. This time, I will catch you off guard. Do you remember what I said? Those who cannot win deserve defeat.

It will be my great, great pleasure to defeat you.

Fifty-Second Installment

Fifty-Second Installment: Breaking of the Storm

"I'm coming with you."

Though Thor knew by now how willful and strong Jane Foster was, it still surprised him she was so reckless. "Absolutely not."

Support came from the most unexpected (and unwelcome) quarter imaginable.

Loki slid an arm around Jane's shoulders. "You may as well allow it, brother. She is hardly helpless, and her expertise will be needed once we reach our destination."

Jane gave Thor a look of triumph, folding her arms. With her feet planted apart and chest lifted, she looked like a warrior ready to charge. And Loki, wearing a faint smirk, was ready to be her second. They looked like a brother and sister standing up to an unreasonable parent, demanding to be allowed to wreak havoc.

And Thor found himself completely helpless before them. His shoulders slumped. "Fine. But if anything happens to her, I'm holding you responsible, brother."

"Hey, don't talk about me like I'm not here," Jane commanded. "Loki isn't responsible for me. I make my own decisions. So don't treat me like some damsel in distress."

Loki's smirk had grown into a wickedly-delighted grin. "She has you there, *brother*. And something tells me in a battle of wills, she would always emerge the victor."

Why she allowed Loki to talk over her head Thor didn't know, and it made him mad. No, he realized. He thought he should be mad. Deeper down, he found this whole exchange pleasing. His sarcastic brother was including Jane in their family in a way that wasn't condescending.

He shook his head and heaved a sigh. "I cannot win against you."

"Either of us," Loki agreed. "Then shall we, Miss Foster? Stark tells me there is already a jet on the roof. Are there things you need to prepare?"

"Yes," Jane said, disregarding Thor completely and linking her arm with the one Loki offered her. "I could use your help." So saying, she gave him a sunny smile.

Which Loki returned with one so sweet it startled Thor. "It would be my pleasure."

And off they went, and Thor watched with a bemused smile. *There was nothing forced or insincere about that. Nothing at all.* His brother radiated nothing but contentment.

"Wow, it was like watching two gods of mischief tag-team a god of thunder," Natasha said.

Thor started slightly; he seldom heard her approach. "Tag-team?"

She chuckled. "Gang up? Those two will be a real handful if you're not careful, big brother."

"I honestly look forward to it," Thor said, once again casting his imagination into the future. Would Loki return to Asgard one day? It was hard to picture, but he could hope. Hope for the best, expect the worst. Wasn't that the human expression?

"Jet's ready," Stark said, trotting in. "Where is everyone?"

"Steve's on his way," Natasha said, "he just had to grab his shield. Clint went to get a snack. Think Bruce is with him. And Loki and Jane have been plotting together all morning."

Stark raised an eyebrow at her. "Plotting?"

"How best to annoy big brother," she said. "I've been watching them. They're getting along famously."

Stark shuddered. "The horror."

"Don't like not being the smartest person in the room?"

"I am right now," he quipped.

"Ha!" Natasha punched his arm. "Where's your hammer, Thor?"

"Already on the jet," Stark answered. "Do the dynamic duo know where we're going exactly?"

"Somewhere north of Laramie," Natasha replied.

Thor found himself wondering what it would look like. Midgard had a much more varying climate than did Asgard. He found it nothing short of amazing a world could contain barren tundra and desolate desert in one small place.

"Yeah, I know that much," Stark grunted. "I located a private landing strip in Laramie. I have a few choppers standing by, they wanted to know if I could be more specific."

Natasha shrugged. "Jane just said she'd know more once we're out over the desert."

He harrumphed.

oOo

Flying, Loki supposed, would do in a pinch. It was much more convenient to use magic as a means of fast travel, or even the shadow between places. For being unable to use magic, humans had certainly found clever ways to make do. And this jet was luxuriously comfortable, with plenty of space for the Avengers to lounge and socialize. Loki disdained both, thoroughly enjoying Jane Foster's company. She was intelligent and inquisitive, and she seemed to enjoy teaching him about her research, her equipment, and any other modern-day marvels.

Right now, she was showing him her most recent map of astronomical phenomena. She'd been charting them for years, and it was fascinating to see trends unfold in her maps.

"Sometimes," she said, "I almost get the feeling they're behaving intelligently. Or at least, in some sort of pattern."

"I understand how you would come to that conclusion," Loki said, nodding idly.

She looked at him a moment in silence. "You know, I think SHIELD was totally wrong about you."

Slightly amused, Loki leaned back in his plush seat. "Oh?"

"They paint you as some sort of tyrannical monster," she said. "You're not. You just help in a much

quieter way."

He smiled faintly. "Is that how you see my actions? As help?"

"You're certainly not aiding our enemies, are you?" she countered.

The words startled a soft laugh from him. "I suppose not."

"Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that. I don't have any problem working with you."

"I'm glad," he said truthfully, "because I do as well. Tell me, have you discovered what gift the Aether gave you?"

Jane smiled, and it was a very mischievous expression. "Yes. It didn't take that long."

His lips quirked. "And are you planning to keep me in suspense?"

"I think so," she said. "I like that thought. Me keeping *you* in the dark for once."

Shaking his head with a soft snort of amusement, Loki crossed his ankles. "My brother will say I've been a bad influence."

She just grinned. "Everyone needs a little mischief in their lives."

"You, my dear, will be very good for Thor."

The devious sparkle in her eye told him she knew.

oOo

The wide open sagebrush plains of Wyoming were a familiar sight to Jane, but a glance at Thor told her the man she loved was not accustomed to such terrain. She smiled and slid her hand into his. "Don't have deserts like this in Asgard?"

He shook his head. "No. No realm varies as much as this one."

She smiled. "Earth has its charms, doesn't it?"

He chuckled.

Looking back to her scanning equipment, she saw they were headed in exactly the right direction. The signal got stronger, and she continued to direct the pilot to adjust his course as it got closer and closer. Eventually they were close enough she gave the pilot the go ahead to land. The chopper set down, and she saw the other one do the same. The two sleek machines powered down, and Jane scanned the area.

Some antelope were sprinting off in the distance, probably alarmed by the sound of the choppers. Dark green sagebrush grew everywhere, and the rugged terrain was dotted by broken rocks and scars in the earth. It was a desolate and beautiful place, in its way. She heard Steve Rogers direct the two pilots to remain with their birds and keep in radio contact.

When the Avengers had gathered around her, Jane nodded toward the southeast. "It isn't much farther that way," she said, showing Loki her scanner when he stepped to her side.

"Then let's go," the captain said, slinging his shield onto his back.

"So, how's this supposed to work?" Natasha asked.

Jane let Loki explain, her mind wandering over the last few days. They'd been amazingly eventful, things changing in ways she never could have guessed. Thor treated her like his intended, Loki treated her like a sister, and she had gained abilities from the Aether that she had a hard time comprehending still.

She'd always had a keen sense of what other people were feeling. Good at reading faces or body language, this sort of empathy had expanded into something much more tangible. She could actually *see* emotions in bursts of color. Strong anger was a fiery orange-red. Fear was a kind of yellow-green. Passion was a rich blue-violet. It was an interesting effect, and she quite liked it. Every person's feelings were like a mini nova contained in a tiny body.

More practical was an ability to see colors of the world itself. She could see ribbons of light in the air itself, sort of vibrating with force. She knew all she would have to do was part them like a curtain to step into a completely different place.

There were other things she was still working out, but she honestly couldn't wait to fight at Thor's side as an equal as well as his wife.

Really, she was blushing like a school girl. Loki's green, green eyes met hers, and he gave her the faintest hint of a smirk that told her somehow he knew what was on her mind. He felt like a partner in crime these days. Certainly not a man to be considered a dire enemy.

She . . . liked him. He was so charming and mischievous, a constant devious glitter in his eye that said he was always a step away from causing mayhem.

And though no one had confirmed her suspicions, she knew now that Loki and Stark were lovers. Though Loki wasn't obvious about it (at all, it would be impossible to tell from him alone), Stark was. He looked at Loki like a lovesick puppy, touching him constantly. Loki's only indication that it was a mutual arrangement was that he didn't level Stark for his indiscretion and gall.

"It's right above us," she said abruptly, "and holding steady."

Loki looked up, and he passed a hand through the air overhead. With a shimmer of green light, an opaque and shadowy oval appeared in the air. It was a good thousand meters off the ground, and it grew darker near the center. Only Loki and Thor gazed at it with meaningful expressions.

After a moment, Loki sighed and folded his hands over his waist. "This will take some time. I may even need your help at some point, Miss Foster."

Thor looked mystified, but Jane just nodded.

Loki closed his eyes and let his chin fall toward his chest. A brilliant green nimbus sprang up around him, and it gradually formed a slender column right up to the oval doorway in the sky. When the two magicks touched, the doorway pulsed with blindingly bright light for several seconds before it settled.

Thor unhooked the Warhammer from his belt and held it loosely. "Now we can do naught but wait."

Jane could see every one of the Avengers sigh. *I know how you feel*, she thought with a sigh of her own. She hated waiting.

Natasha stared at her nails or fiddled with her wrist cuffs. Clint kept checking his arrow quiver,

seeming paranoid about its working order. Steve stood unmoving, eyes constantly scanning the sky as if expecting Thanos to drop out of it at any second. Bruce watched the ground, arms folded and posture relaxed. His eyes, however, were alert, and she could see he was a little anxious.

Seconds ticked by into minutes, and by almost thirty of them, Jane felt a whisper across her mind. Her whole body tensed, and her eyes darted around. Thor's hand landed on her shoulder.

"What is it?" he murmured.

She shook her head. "Something's wrong."

Every Avenger instantly went on high alert, looking around wildly as if expecting Thanos to pop out of the air itself. Stark, who had not been wearing his suit just a moment ago, was now fully garbed in it.

"What's wrong? Is it working?"

Jane watched Loki intently, his green eyes were locked with hers. Again, she shook her head. "I don't know. I just know something's *wrong*."

"You can now sense approaching danger," Loki said, voice surprisingly soft. "Are you sure you can simply but sense the Mad Titan nearing?"

"No," Jane insisted. "I know what that would feel like. This is different. It's too . . . quiet."

"The Aether agrees," Loki said after a moment. "Brother, perhaps you and Stark should scan the area from above? A bird's eye view may provide a new perspective."

Thor and Stark both nodded, and a second later they were airborne. Jane, overcome by a weird protectiveness toward Loki, stepped closer to him. The Aether, in her pendant form around Loki's neck, resonated strongly at her nearness. She felt the same way as Jane, ready to do absolutely anything to protect those whom she loved.

It was a little strange to feel that so clearly from something she had both hated and feared.

"We're right here, Loki," Steve said, voice low.

Words which made the god of mischief give him a tiny smirk. "Good to know should I need to protect you."

Rueful mirth burst through the Avengers in silvery blue, and Jane felt her own blossom in her chest.

"Something's coming," Stark said abruptly, his voice a bit tinny through the comm bud in her ear. "Looks like a little ship or something."

Loki frowned. "Chitauri in origin?"

"Kinda," Stark confirmed, sounding a tad doubtful. "I'll go check it out."

"Don't stray too far!" Steve ordered.

And was summarily ignored by the Ironman. Jane rolled her eyes. Really, he was such a kid in a grown man's body. The Avengers on the ground continued to watch and wait, Loki never stopping his spell.

"Okay, there are three little ships," Stark's voice announced. He was now only a blurry blip in the sky. "And they ain't Chitauri. I don't recognize them."

"Maintain your guard," Loki murmured. "Mad Titan will be expecting a trap. These scouts will likely only be trying to determine the extent of the trap."

A burst of bright red light flared, followed immediately by a vicious curse from Stark.

"Mother of—these things pack quite a punch! Bastard just put a little dent in my armor!"

"Be careful, Stark!" Steve snapped.

No sooner had he issued his warning than the sky lit up with silvery blue lightning. Jane heard a faint shriek of abused metal and winced. Another burst of red light, the ships and the two Avengers too far away to be seen clearly. Jane took a deep breath and focused inward, and a moment later her eyes zoomed in on the scene like telephoto lenses.

The three ships were indeed small, like Stark had said. They looked only distantly like the little Chitauri "skips", these designs more sleek and aerodynamic. They were highly maneuverable, doing an impressive job of avoiding both Thor and Stark. One of them managed to finally zoom past them, headed for the remaining Avengers.

"One of them's headed this way," she said, not looking at Steve.

The captain was already moving, grabbing his shield. "Banner?"

The kind-eyed man ran toward him without a word, leaping up onto the shield. Steve launched him into the air, and midway Bruce turned into the Hulk. One hit from giant green fists had the ship plummeting to the ground.

"Destroy them, Stark," Loki said, still not raising his voice. "Do not let them communicate anything to their master."

"You got it, princess," Stark's voice confirmed.

Jane felt herself smiling again.

But the sense of wrongness persisted. It just grew stronger and stronger until she felt like she was panicking, wishing she understood what it was or where it was coming from. The remaining two ships were dispatched easily and soon joined by a fourth and fifth, but they were as small and easy as the first three. And still the sense of wrongness persisted until it was like an air raid alarm from the 1940s screaming in her head.

Danger. Wrong. Danger! Wrong! DANGER! DANGER! DANGERDANGERDANGERWRONG!

It persisted until the air split open like a rotten banana peel and a brilliant light of pure gold spilled from it, a large dagger riding on its impressive wake.

The words didn't have time to pass Jane's lips, tangled up in her throat in a choked scream of warning and everything slowed to a crawl.

Loki's eyes went wide, the verdant irises shining in a haze of pain and shock. The green nimbus surrounding him vanished, the large dagger protruding from right between his shoulder blades. It seemed too *mundane* to be real. A dagger? Taking on a god? How had Loki not simply sensed its approach and stepped out of its way? And why was he now surrounded by a nimbus of gold?

Gold that bled up into his green, green eyes?

Little more than a gasp escaped his lips as he fell to hands and knees.

Jane stared, uncomprehending. From the hole in the air streamed that gold, unbroken, pouring into Loki from the dagger that had impaled him. The pendant around Loki's neck was now pouring liquid black, the Aether seeming to form a barrier between Loki and the gold light.

Jane's eyes widened more as it occurred to her what she was witnessing.

Yggdrasil. That gold light is the magic of Yggdrasil.

For a few more torturous seconds, it seemed like the Aether would succeed in freeing Loki from the grip of gold. Then, with a tiny little *tink* of broken metal that filled the air like a death knell, the chain broke and the pendant fell from his neck.

Loki reared up, head falling back and mouth opening as if to scream. No sound came out. Only gold, spilling down his throat and body and pooling all around him.

Thor and Stark both descended like a falling mountain, attacking that rift in the air from which the gold continued to flow. There was a pulse of blinding light, and both warriors were flung back. A low laugh rolled across the distance between them, and there he was.

The Mad Titan.

Impressively large, mouth fixed in an ugly sneer.

"You may as well give up," he said in an oddly cultured voice. "He is beyond your reach."

"He is not," Thor growled, already recovered and returned. "Loki has twice resisted and recovered from the pull of Yggdrasil!"

"Not like this, he hasn't," Thanos murmured, gazing down at Loki like an owner on a well-loved pet. "It is inside him now, son of Odin. I really must thank you."

"You can thank us when you're dead, son of a bitch!" Stark snarled, opening fire on the Mad Titan.

Thanos was laughing as dirt and rock exploded around him, showering the area with heated debris. Irresponsible of Stark, really, but Jane could find no fault. And it made no difference, harming their enemy not a whit.

The stream of gold light had gotten bigger, widening to a river and then a flood. Thanos was still laughing as the flood swept everything away in a wave of molten gold. Then it passed, and the rift was gone. The gold light was gone. Thanos was gone.

Loki was gone.

Fifty-Third Installment

It's short.

Fifty-Third Installment: Drowning

"Have you, then, learned to control Yggdrasil, Master?"

"Of course not, fool. That is not a skill can be possessed by any man, no matter how clever, no matter how great. I have . . . learned how to direct Yggdrasil's attention."

Yggdrasil's attention. What an alarming concept. What a terrible, awful, mind-numbingly frightening idea. Alert. Aware. Awake enough to have an attention span that can be directed. But it is the energy of all life that flows through branches of the great Tree, not even he understands.

And he understands a lot.

No, I did. I understood once. Not anymore. Now I am nothing. A grain of sand on an endlessly vast beach of gold.

Gold is all he sees. It is all he knows.

It is so much different now. He can remember a time when he was surrounded by gold. This is different. Now he is drowning in it. Gold does not simply flow around him, now. Now, it flows through him. It is in his blood. Pouring through his veins, introduced through the wound on his back that should cause him pain but does not.

He does not remember pain. He thinks pain would be welcome.

If I felt pain, I would be someone. Something other than this tiny mote of green light in a sea of gold.

Green. Loki. Green. Loki.

Loki Loki lokilokiloki . . .

He does not remember how he got the wound.

"Look at me."

A command. A command he does not hear. A command he sees in red, dripping off the lips of a monster. Monster. What a peculiar word. Dark, furry, horned things creeping in children's closets and under beds and in the woods and in the dark shadows of hallways to snatch up the unsuspecting and disobedient, to haul them off and stick them in pots of stew to be consumed.

He laughs, and it hurts his throat because he can't hear the sound but he can see it.

Red. Red that tastes like blood and feels like the grave.

"Focus."

Focus. Don't laugh. Yes, focus. Don't laugh.

"Look at you. I can practically feel your mind trying to fight off the madness."

Red explodes in his back. He screams. Not because it hurts, because he doesn't feel anything anymore. But because he thinks he should. And he regrets it, because he doesn't like seeing what he should be hearing.

I remember thinking it was difficult to exist like that in green. Now I wish I was there again. There in green instead of gold.

I hate gold.

oOo

They call him Mad Titan because he loves Death. It is madness to love Death, they say. Death cannot feel, it is a force of nature as empty and cold as one might expect. But he cannot help it, he loves her.

They call him that because they have never seen true madness. But he has, and he is watching it unravel. It is fascinating.

If he did not love Death, then might perhaps he love this child? This green-eyed child who is so captivating in his pain? Who screams like he does not remember pain?

Thanos thinks so.

"It is a shame you must die for what I desire," he murmurs, driving a slim crystal rod into Loki's back through the existing wound.

The wound allows the raw energy of Yggdrasil to flow straight into Loki, channeling it like a fountain unable to turn off. The rod will prevent the wound from healing, and no material in all the Nine is a better conductor of magic than crystal. Loki is like a livewire now, and Yggdrasil is hungry for him.

How fascinating, that Yggdrasil should desire after anything. It is not a being, in a much different way than the Aether. It was incredible enough that the Aether developed a consciousness. That Yggdrasil should do anything remotely the same is absolutely unbelievable.

"You are special," he continues, enjoying the tormented sounds Loki keeps making, quite certain the green-eyed god is not aware of him at all. "I would spare you if I could." He isn't angry that Loki had thwarted him all those months ago.

Well, he amends with a soft chuckle, not any longer.

"It's somewhat of an irony," he goes on, "that I only thought to do this because you channeled Yggdrasil's magic to protect those humans. I must say it took me quite some time to figure it out."

Finally, those tortured green eyes move to meet his. Naked from the waist up, blood liberally decorates his thin torso. It is an appalling and beautiful contrast to the ivory of his skin. And of course, he is haloed in golden light. For a moment, he thinks Loki will protest, argue, or perhaps even curse him.

It is laughter that spills off his lips. A dark, twisted laugh that stains his lips crimson.

Beautiful. Thanos sighs. "You would be pleased by my plan, I think. I had thought to take control of the doorways and reopen them for my Lady. With you, with this power, I will no longer need

them. I will simply tear them open. Odin and his father and all of Asgard's might could not stand in the way of this power. Finally, my Lady will be back in the Nine where she belongs. With me."

Loki is not listening. He is writhing, his body contorting in the shining wet crimson and the gleaming liquid gold. Madness and pain are consuming him. And this time, he will not resurface.

The Mad Titan smiles. "I've won, Loki. You will not outmaneuver me, this time. But you were a worthy opponent. I shall very much enjoy watching you open like an exquisite blossom, then wither and die in the coming storm." He leans down and covers Loki's mouth with one hand, kissing the Aesir youth's forehead.

"But I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Because of you, my Lady and I will be reunited. I wish you were aware enough I could thank you properly."

He releases Loki, but the Aesir does not look at him. His green eyes stare blankly into nothing, chest heaving with every labored breath, and what he sees Thanos cannot say.

Perhaps he sees nothing at all.

But then again, perhaps he sees it all.

Fifty-Fourth Installment

Perhaps a warning: these next chapters will be dark.

Fifty-Fourth Installment: Rain of Blood

"It's been twenty-four hours. Why the fuck haven't we done anything?"

Though Thor hadn't required proof, he had received it: Stark absolutely loved Loki. The man was frantic in his desire to do something, anything, to locate the missing Aesir. Thor himself felt a deep and terrible fear for his brother, but the depth of Stark's worry somehow managed to surprised the golden prince.

"I am worried about him too, Stark," he said gently, "but we don't know how to find Thanos."

"Bullshit," Stark snarled. His countenance was wild, as though he hadn't slept at all since Loki's disappearance. Maybe he hadn't. "What about all you powerful people in your high-and-mighty Asgard? In Alfheim? In Nidavellir? Loki can't be the only person in the entire fucking galaxy who knows how to locate someone!"

Thor's first reaction to the accusation was one of anger, but then he blinked. It was true, he'd really only been utilizing Heimdall, whose power could be blocked by one clever enough. Like Loki. *Or Thanos, it would seem.* He rose to his feet at once.

"I will return to Asgard immediately," he said, "and make inquiries."

"Loki was pretty friendly with the king of Alfheim," Stark said, sounding like he would rather eat glass than say those words. "What was his name? Freyr?"

A surprising revelation. "I didn't know Loki even knew him."

"He had the last Casket Loki wanted," Stark snapped, glaring at Thor as if he'd committed some grave, personal affront. "What did you think Loki was doing after he killed the witch?"

The words sent a pang of hurt through the blonde Aesir. *Why would Loki tell a human of that but not his own brother?* "He didn't say," he murmured. Then he shook himself. There wasn't time for that. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"And what are we supposed to do while you're off playing messenger?" Stark demanded.

"I could use your help," Jane interceded here, "yours and Dr. Banner's. My scanning equipment recorded very distinct energy signatures when Thanos appeared. It's a long shot, but maybe if we retune my equipment we'll get something."

"It's better than doing nothing," Tony grunted.

Leaning down, Thor pressed a light kiss to her cheek. "I'll be back as soon as I can." To Stark, "Please make sure no one touches the Aether."

Tony's glare darkened. Since Loki had disappeared, the Aether had been emitting that cold black light without cessation. No one could even go near it, and it had badly burned Thor's hand when he tried to touch it last. Only Jane had been able to safely move it. It was currently sealed in Stark's

laboratory.

Jane walked at his side up to the roof of Stark Tower, holding his hand the whole way. When they reached the helipad, she tugged him to a stop. She stood on tiptoes to kiss him, and even then he still had to lean down so his petite love could reach him.

"Hurry," she whispered. "Stark is ready to do something stupid. And . . . I'm afraid for Loki. Something terrible happened. I can feel it."

It was strange to know she'd been changed by the Aether, but it was also somehow reassuring. "I'll be back soon." Regretfully disentangling himself, Thor moved away from her. "Heimdall."

The burst of light from the Bifrost surrounded him, and her beautiful face disappeared from sight. When the light faded, Heimdall inclined his head.

"Welcome home, my prince."

Thor spared only the time to nod back before sprinting out onto the rainbow bridge, Mjölnir already spinning in his hand. The royal guards at the golden palace entrance opened the doors for him at once, bowing.

"Your father has been told of your arrival, my prince," one of them called. "He awaits you."

Thor nodded as he hurried past. Both his mother and father were already in the audience hall, along with two royal sorcerers whose talent did not surpass Frigga's own but was notable. They both bowed to the prince, but for once Thor forewent politeness for haste.

"Mother, Father," he said, giving the queen a quick hug and kissing her forehead.

"Thor," she murmured. "What has happened? We sensed a terrible disturbance from Yggdrasil. I've never felt anything like it."

Thor took a deep breath. "I scarce know where to begin. You're aware of the one they call Mad Titan?"

"Yes," Frigga said with a glance to her husband. "Loki told me aught of him during our visits in his dreamscape. He said he expected to aid the Avengers in challenging him. That he was the greatest threat Midgard had likely ever faced."

"I sensed him make contact with one of the gates I and my father sealed ages past," Odin added, "though I also sensed he did not break the seal or tamper with it."

Thor nodded. "He simply used an enchantment to lure Thanos to us. It was our intent to challenge him right there. Destroy him if we could, defeat him if we could not. However . . ."

"That isn't what happened?" Frigga surmised with a rueful half-smile.

"It is not," Thor confirmed. "Somehow, Thanos knew everything. Where we would be. He planned a trap for Loki. One that completely and utterly rendered him helpless in an instant."

"One that involved the energies of Yggdrasil, my prince?" one of the two sorcerers asked.

"Yes," Thor said. "Loki has somehow learned to channel that raw energy."

The four Aesir stared at him as though he'd sprouted a second head. And then possibly a third.

"Impossible," Odin stated.

"How in Borr's name . . . ?" Frigga trailed off.

Thor shook his head. "I am sorry, but I haven't the time to explain. I am rallying all help to find him. I know not what Thanos plans, but he must not be allowed to prevail. More personally . . . I have lost Loki twice only to have him returned twice. I could not bear a third time."

Frigga leaned up and kissed his cheek. "Nor could I. What do you need us to do?"

"Go to Nidavellir. Go to Alfheim. There are many who will help us. I myself am off to Helheim. Something tells me Hel will cast us her aid, as well."

Nodding, Frigga turned him back toward the audience hall entrance. "Then go now. Freyr is a cousin of mine. I will leave soon."

"Do not worry, my son," Odin added. "We will find your brother. And the Mad Titan will answer to us all."

The inclusion of Loki back into the family was a desperately welcome one. Thor merely nodded his thanks, suddenly not trusting his voice to speak. Turning on his heel, he strode back out of the hall. Yes, they would find him.

And then Thanos would be made to pay.

oOo

"This is pointless," Tony growled, throwing the tablet across the room. It was too well made to break, and that disappointed him.

"This is all we can do," Jane Foster countered at once, her eyes flinty.

So she wasn't happy. Big fucking deal. Her lover wasn't lost gods-knew-where, suffering what just might be his final battle with insanity. Tony didn't really know what Thanos planned, but he knew it wasn't tea and crumpets.

"You'd be trying harder if Thor was missing." As soon as the words left his mouth he regretted them. They were unfair and untrue.

Her hazel eyes went cold. "I know you're upset, so I'm not going to hold that comment against you."

"Shit," he muttered, rubbing both hands over his face. There was some new growth to his normally neatly-trimmed beard. "I'm sorry. Why don't you two go get some food? We've been at this for almost four hours."

Jane's posture and expression didn't thaw completely, but she relented a little. "Good idea. Dr. Banner?"

Bruce gave Tony a hard look. "You gonna be okay?"

"Fine," Tony lied.

Maybe his closest friend could hear the untruth, but he just nodded and followed Jane from the lab. It took all Tony's self-control to not immediately destroy every piece of equipment in sight.

"Jarvis," he called, "lock this room and don't let anyone in."

"Sir?"

"Just do it," Tony snapped, lurching up out of his chair and going to the table where lay the most dangerous weapon on Earth.

The Aether had not once stopped glowing that freaky black since Loki's disappearance. No one could even touch the pendant to replace the broken chain. Even though he knew this was absolutely madness, Tony approached the table.

"If you can hear me," he said in a low voice, "talk to me now." So saying, he reached out and cupped the crystal in both hands.

He didn't know what to expect. To be burned? For both hands to just fall off or be dissolved? Nothing happened except a cold sensation.

"Stark," she said. "Why aren't you doing anything? Where is he? Where is my Loki?"

"Our Loki," Tony corrected. "I'm with you, here. I want to find him more than anything. But he's not on Earth, so I have no idea how."

"There is one," she said, "one who could help us. One who owes Loki. She owes him. She will help. We must go to her. She will help."

"Who?" Tony demanded, feeling a surge of desperate hope.

"Hel. She is the one to whom Loki gave those Caskets. She will help. She must. She must."

"Then let's go," Tony said without a second thought. "Can you get us to her?"

"No. Only Loki could use my power to do that. But I can take you into the dreamscape. You need only wear me around your neck and fall asleep. I will do the rest."

Tony nodded. "I'm going to go find a new chain for your pendant. I'll be back in a flash."

"Hurry, Stark. Hurry."

Tony ran out of his lab as if his ass was on fire.

oOo OoO oOo

Nothing ever changed in Helheim. It was a cold, dark place. Some might find the cold and dark to be oppressive. Frightening. Even evil. Not her. She found them peaceful. Predictable. Comfortable. Nothing ever changed.

Until he came. The one raised as the second Odinson, born the third Laufeyson. Loki. Troubled, tormented, brilliantly insane Loki. He came with his bargain. With his promise.

She could not resist him. He made her so curious, he was so interesting. So clever, so twisted.

She should not have been surprised when the mortal human came into her dreamscape. She should not have been surprised to see the large god's tear crystal around his neck containing the Aether. Of course Loki would have been able to do such a thing.

"Who are you?" she asked of the mortal.

"Tony Stark," he replied. "I . . . we . . . need your help."

"We?" she repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"The Ather and I," this one called Stark replied, his dark eyes holding the threat of losing control.

He told her, in short and choppy language, what had happened. What he wanted. *It seems Loki will never stop astonishing me*, she mused to herself. *He made a sentient being out of the Aether? One with its own wants and needs and desires?*

Once, she would have scoffed, *"Impossible."* Absurd, even.

And yet, he'd done it.

"I do have all four Caskets now," she said when Stark and the Aether were silent. "And one of them yet requires a favor to him in return." She nodded absently, staring out the window of her bower into the cold darkness of Helheim.

"I should very much dislike to see Death return," she said quietly. "Though she is as natural as Life, she is utterly devoid of feeling. If Thanos manages to convince her to work with him, she will feel no mercy toward those he destroys. I myself would be among them."

The human named Stark didn't ask her for clarification. Likely, he didn't care. That was fine. She might be inclined to confide in Loki, but not a human. "So can you help him?"

A waspish demand. *No respect for a god?* She almost smiled. "I am not certain, but I will do my best. I would neither like anything to happen to him."

"Thanks," he grunted.

He didn't sound particularly grateful. She didn't particularly mind.

oOo

"What the hell?" Miss Jane Foster cried. "Why can't I wake him?"

Bruce placed fingers that trembled only a little to Tony's neck. As he felt for a pulse, Jarvis spoke.

"He only took a sedative, Miss Foster," the AI voice with its British accent announced. "He wished me to tell you he was seeking aid outside Earth."

"Whatever the hell that means," Bruce muttered, relieved to feel a strong and steady pulse. He avoided touching the black pendant at all costs. "And what about this damn thing?"

Jane, braver by far than a man who couldn't die, reached an unsteady hand for it. "Aether?" she murmured. "Can you hear me?"

Tendrils of black light immediately swarmed up from the crystal globe, encircling Jane's hand. The woman let out a soft gasp, and her dark hazel eyes blanked to ebony. It lasted less than a second before it cleared.

"Wow," Jane gasped when the black light receded. "She took him to speak with Hel, the protector of the realm of the dead. He's just sleeping."

Bruce stared down at Tony, wondering if his best friend in far too long had gone insane. *You love that crazy god enough to do such crazy stuff? I guess I should be happy for you.* He was not. He

only felt afraid.

"Do I even wanna know how?" he inquired.

Jane shook her head. "It's a little hard to explain. Even I don't really know."

He didn't ask for elucidation. The farther removed he was from magic and aliens, the happier he was.

oOo

"Freyr," Frigga murmured, embracing her distant cousin. She hadn't seen him in over a century, but he looked even more youthful and handsome than the last time she'd seen him. "Thank you for seeing me so quickly."

He gave her a mischievous smile. "How could I refuse the mother of the one who has me so enamored?"

"Loki?" she said, blinking in surprise. "My Loki?"

He chuckled. "Yes. Perhaps he didn't tell you he came calling on me. He aided me in my grief over the loss of my wife. And like a damsel in distress I fell hard and fast for my savior. I begged him to stay with me. Even asked for his hand. He sweetly refused."

More and more surprises. Frigga was astonished. *Why did Loki not tell me? This is such an enormous thing!* Freyr would make a fine husband for her son. Far better, she found herself thinking, than that human man Stark. She liked him, but he was human.

"You should have told me sooner," she mused. "I would have joined your campaign to convince him."

"Is it yet too late for that?" he asked, his golden eyes suddenly hopeful.

Frigga's fleeting good humor evaporated. "It may be. I'm afraid I've come seeking your help. Loki has been taken by Thanos. My son, Thor, explained the Mad Titan's methods. He truly could not have devised a worse torture for my youngest. I am deathly afraid for him."

Freyr's eyes went dark with concentrated rage. "Tell me what I must do. If it be in my power, I will do it."

Reaching out, she took his hand and squeezed. "Thank you, Freyr. It means more to me than you know."

oOo

"Mad Titan has Prince Loki?" Brokkr exclaimed.

"How could you let that happen?" Sindri barked at the same time.

Thor nodded. "Thanos used a . . . tactic none of us were expecting. I'm afraid he used a power not even Loki could fight."

"This is unacceptable," Sindri snarled.

His brother was a little more pragmatic. "What must we do? Surely you're here because you have a plan? Whatever it is, whatever it takes, we will help you."

Sindri nodded his agreement, though his eyes still betrayed his anger.

"All I need is your assistance in locating Thanos," Thor replied. "There are others looking, too. Your aid would be deeply appreciated."

"We will find him," Sindri said at once. "Surely none are as devoted to that cause than we, the Dwarves."

That, Thor thought with an inward grimace, was not true. He was genuinely worried about Stark. The human possessed certain self-destructive tendencies . . .

"You have my eternal gratitude," he said quietly, giving the brothers a bow, "and that of Asgard."

"We will not do this thing for Asgard," Sindri scoffed.

Brokkr merely nodded. "It will be done. How shall we let you know what we find?"

"Heimdall," Thor told them. "He will know if you have need to speak with me."

"Then you should leave to your own search," the elder brother said. "Luck to us all."

"Luck to us all," Thor repeated softly, turning to go.

They would need more than luck. Of that, he was sure.

o0o 0o0 o0o

The pain is incredible. Feel it. Taste it. See it. It consumes him. It is different than before. Before, the pain was an oasis from the madness. Now the pain is the source of madness, and he is utterly lost within it. No matter how hard he holds to the fraying ends of his sanity, they are slipping from his grasp. But he cannot let them go. He cannot. There is too much at stake. He absolutely MUST accomplish one last goal.

"This thing. These people. You are very attached to them."

It shouldn't be discernible, from all the screaming inside his head, that voice. Yet though it is a whisper, the sound carries above all the noise. Rings in his mind. Clear as a bell. Ominous as a death knell.

I gave my word I would protect them. I must protect them.

"Why?"

I cannot. I cannot.

"They are tiny. But they are not insignificant to you, are they?"

No. They are not.

"Do you love them?"

He squeezes his eyes shut. But the second he does, he can see everything in existence, so he opens them again. He is drowning in gold, but that is better than everything.

"Why do you not simply give yourself to me? Become one with me."

I cannot. I must keep my bargain.

It is so important. So important to him. It is the only part of him that is not gold. A tiny mote of green in a universe of gold.

"It is almost a shame you must die."

Die. What a tiny, pitiful word. Death is for the mundane. No, he will not die. He will melt down into gold. Death, he thinks, would be a welcome reprieve from this.

"Why? Are you so afraid of becoming one with me? You would become so much more than you are now."

I don't want that.

"What do you want?"

I must keep my bargain.

"And how will you accomplish that? This creature, this insect, he has you well and truly trapped in his insignificant web."

I will find a way. I cannot let him succeed. I cannot.

"He thinks you are lost. Lost in me."

Let him think that. Let him think he has won.

It is the only way I will succeed.

Fifty-Fifth Installment

Fifty-Fifth Installment: Silence of the Darkness

Nidavellir, Hel thought with a little smile, was not a place she oft visited. In fact, she'd been there only once, and that was almost a millennium ago. As she made her careful way to the huge, iron-wrought gates of the city walls, she heard a shout go up. Well, she couldn't exactly blame them. No one could mistake Hel for a common traveler, and the goddess of the Underworld only appeared to the dying or the dead.

The heavy gates groaned open, and two enormous dwarves stood just within. Their battleaxes were drawn, and though they weren't pointed right at her, they looked neither friendly nor welcoming.

"Lady Hel," one of them grunted. "This is unexpected. What business do you have here?"

Wanting very much to be out of the warmth and sun, Hel nevertheless cast back her hood. No light reflected off her long, straight black hair. It was dull and without shine. It made her look like a corpse, she had been told.

"I must speak with Brokkr," she said. "It is a matter of supreme urgency. Tell him I wish to help search for something that has been taken, something we both love very much."

The dwarf cast a look over his shoulder, and Hel heard the thump of booted feet racing off. At least they weren't dallying around and delaying. Of course, when Hel left Helheim, no matter where she went people took her seriously. *I didn't ask to be made the queen of Hell, but at least Odin's assignment ensures when I have need for haste, it is answered.*

The dwarves did not invite her in while they waited for the messenger to return, and Hel didn't begrudge them that. She wasn't kept waiting long. The thunder of booted feet told her several dwarves were returning, and she was pleased to see Brokkr at their head. The leader of the city looked a little winded as he pushed between the two gate guards.

"Lady Hel," he said. "Is this about Prince Loki?"

"Yes," she murmured, looking at the gawping dwarves. "I have an idea how to find him, but I will need your assistance."

"Anything," he said at once, beckoning her to follow.

When they were alone, Hel removed her long black cloak.

"What can we do?" Brokkr's brother, Sindri, asked.

Always the more impatient of the two, that one. "Loki gave you a vial of his seiðr, did he not?" she asked.

"Yes," Brokkr said, sounding hesitant. "How can that . . . ?"

"It is something that belonged to him," Hel explained. "Intimately. I'm certain I can use it to trace his location."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Sindri said. "Do it. Can you do it right here and now?"

"No," Hel replied with a ghost of a smile. "I will need to be home, I did not bring the necessary tools with me. I will take the vial with me, if that is all right."

"Take it, then," Brokkr said. "It is not full any longer, we have used some. Will that make a difference?"

She shook her head. "I should only need a little."

"Use it all, if you must," the elder dwarf said. "We would rather have our prince safe and sound than a vial of seiðr."

Her smile grew a little. "I rather feel the same."

Sindri rushed off, and Brokkr faced her with a deep frown.

"Is this really possible? Can you really do it?"

"There is no guarantee," she admitted, "but I am confident. It is, after all, a little trick I learned from Loki himself."

Brokkr stared over her shoulder. "So clever, he is. It would be a tremendous blow to all Nidavellir if he . . ."

This time, her smile was more of a smirk. "Have no fear of that. If anyone could survive the crush of the universe itself, it would be him."

That elicited a whisper of a chuckle from the hairy-faced dwarf, and Sindri came bolting back into the room, hands clutched to his breast. He held out a vial that fit snugly in her palm.

The glowing contents were slightly warm to the touch. The color was a soft but vibrant green, shimmering like liquid light within its glass prison. Exquisite, really. Bottling seiðr was a feat impossible for all but the most skilled mages, for this was not the magic's natural state. Hel had never actually seen it done before.

"Thank you," she murmured, sliding it carefully into her belt.

They escorted her out, and she was grateful for their hurry. As the ruler of Helheim, small talk was not her strongest talent.

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She does not care about beginnings and endings. Those are small, insignificant things. Every life has a beginning, it has an inevitable end. Its very nature dictates all things will eventually come back to Her, so She does not worry about death, destruction, chaos, and war. They all must eventually come to an end, even if they last eons upon eons. Everything will settle back into the ultimate ebb and flow of all life.

So She does not feel inclined to help him, to save a realm. Or even all nine of them.

"Death," She says, "is not the end. There is no reason to fear it."

I am not afraid, he thinks. Fear is for the sane. Fear is for those in their own minds enough to actually understand.

"Are you ready?" a voice says from far, far away. "This probably won't work, but I have to start somewhere."

Pain suddenly washes everything away in a tide of blazing white. He screams, but the sound gets choked in his throat by red. The blood tastes like a grave. Sweet decay. He does not understand what's happening to him. He cannot see anything except gold. But ribbons of fire are carving lines through his body, starting from his neck and working all the way down to his feet.

There is a disturbing clench in his belly, and heat suddenly spews from his mouth. He hasn't been this aware of his own body in quite some time, he thinks. He can feel his muscles start to spasm and shake, straining against bonds he can neither see nor feel, but they are holding him securely.

"Are you afraid of dying?" She asks.

His eyes roll back in his head, mouth gasping for air he can breathe no longer. But then blood pours down his throat, thick and constricting, so he quickly lets his head fall toward his chest again. A wet splatter, more heat on his lips. He finally manages to open his eyes and stares blearily at his own thin, naked body. Thick rivers of molten gold are flowing down his body, shored up by his own flesh. There is a wide pool of blood beneath him.

Dying. Afraid? No. He thinks he might even welcome it.

A shadow falls over him, and he remembers Thanos. Unbearable heat abruptly builds in his chest, and his head snaps up, striking the surface behind him. He can't feel it. He doesn't try to scream this time. He can't draw in enough air.

The crystal rod through his chest, wider than his finger, is blazing with Mad Titan's seiðr. He is trying to control Yggdrasil, maybe. But he amends that assumption when a different kind of pain fills him.

Green rises to the surface of Loki's skin. His eyes widen in sudden horror. *No. No, you cannot do this to me.* He wants to scream. To protest with every fiber of his being. But he can't breathe, he can only watch as Thanos uses that terrible rod to draw Loki's seiðr out of his body and replace with Mad Titan's. Watch as green is replaced with dark blue. His body shrieks in agonized disapproval. This is wrong.

Unnatural.

"It's all right, little one. Let yourself sink down into me. I will protect you."

For the first time, he thinks that wouldn't be so bad.

Fifty-Sixth Installment

How fast I'm updating! O_O

Fifty-Sixth Installment: If I Fall

Thor ran to the huge doors of the fortress-like building Hel called home. His heart was racing in equal parts dread, hope, and anger. Just as he raised Mjölhnir to strike them down and out of his way, they groaned open. He didn't waste time pondering as he sprinted inside, for a split second seeing a corridor in front of him. Then he blinked and he was inside a round room with a ceiling so high he almost couldn't see it in the darkness above.

There, standing in the center of four pedestals, was Hel. The guardian of the Underworld was tall but thin, far thinner than Loki. Her skin was deathly white, her hair lank black without luster or shine. Her face reminded of a skull with skin stretched tightly over it and no muscle. Her eyes were black without whites or pupils. And on all four pedestals were the Caskets. Including the Casket of Ancient Winters. Thor knew for a fact Odin would not have consented to give that to her and wondered how she'd gotten it.

Loki, came the immediate answer. Somehow he arranged it. When I took the Tesseract from the vault, perhaps.

She gave him a slight smile. "Welcome back, prince Odinson. I have found your stolen brother."

The anger evaporated behind a painful burst of hope, bringing Thor up short. "What?"

Finally turning to face him fully, Thor saw she had something cupped in her hands. He'd missed it before. It was a small vial of glowing green liquid. No, he amended. It was Loki's seiðr. The exact vial he'd given to Brokkr and Sindri in Nidavellir what felt like ages past.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Brokkr gave it to me, of course," Hel replied. "I thought to use it to locate Loki. It worked, and I confess I'm a little surprised. I was just on my way to take myself to Thanos' location. Would you like to accompany me?"

"Of course," Thor all but growled, striding toward her and gripping his Warhammer tighter. "This ends here and now."

"And us the unlikeliest of allies," she mused.

There was humor in the words, Thor was not deaf to that. He wasn't much in the mood for jest, and he knew it showed on his face. Hel said nothing more, releasing the vial of seiðr. It remained floating in the air before her as she turned to each Casket. They were all glowing already, but at a gesture from her the glare increased to nearly blinding force. Ribbons of light sprang from each one, reaching to the other Caskets. As soon as they were all connected, a beam flowed from each one right to Hel.

The keeper of souls held out her hands to Thor. "Do not let go. This is a rough way to travel, but it is far less conspicuous than the Bifrost."

Without hesitation, Thor hooked his hammer to his belt and took her hands. Loki's skin was always

cool. Hers was cold as the grave. He had time to blink and the room was gone. For a brief, disorienting moment he had the nauseating impression he was floating in a void without floor or gravity. Then it passed and he was standing on a rocky outcropping, the stones of which were casting off a very faint glow. Hel stood right beside him, the four Caskets floating in the air around them like a shield.

And there was Thanos. In the center of a group of stones that looked similar to Stonehenge on Midgard, the faintly illumined ground was stained with blood. And there too was Loki. Bound by shackles to a huge, upright stone, arms chained above his head, his naked body covered in deep, ragged wounds that were flowing gold as if they were miniature rivers in his very skin. His head was down, chin to chest, skin an unhealthy pallor, trembling visibly.

Thanos had whirled as soon as they appeared, so Thor had an eye-blink to process all this. He needed not an iota longer. His muscles bunched, propelling him into a lunge with no conscious thought, face frozen in a scowl of pure, murderous rage. He threw himself at Thanos, Mjöltnir crackling in his hand, the sound only fueling his anger. Thanos held up both hands, and a glimmering curtain of light appeared around the upright stones like a shield. The force of Thor's blow made it buckle, and he knew he'd need only one more to destroy it completely.

Thanos spun again, this time back to Loki, pointing at the shackles. They opened with a hollow *tink*, and Loki didn't even try to keep himself upright. He collapsed into a boneless sprawl, eyes open mere slits.

"They are interfering," Thanos said, his voice oddly sibilant. "Destroy them, Loki."

"As if you could control him," Thor practically jeered, leaping up to once again strike the barrier. It shattered like glass.

Loki slowly rose, body jerking like a corpse dead long enough for rigor mortis to set in. Thor ran to him, only just noticing a glow in Loki's chest that wasn't gold. It was a crystal rod, one used to conduct magic. He felt sick. Reaching out, he grasped thin shoulders and helped Loki stand upright.

"I have you, brother," he murmured.

"Come away from him, my prince," Hel abruptly said, her voice sounding so tense it set Thor's teeth on edge.

"*Get . . . away . . . from me,*" Loki whispered, his voice raw. Thin and strained. He reached up and lightly pressed his hand to Thor's chest.

Dark blue light sprang up, and Thor went flying backward, heat and pain lancing through him. He struck the outcropping so hard his vision blurred, and he found himself at Hel's feet. Her eyes were dark and troubled.

"What in Borr's name was that?" Thor growled, clambering to his feet. "Loki's seiðr is green!"

Dark blue had gathered around Loki, and Hel was watching him as though fascinated. Or horrified.

"He has done the unthinkable," she whispered.

Loki flung his arms toward them, and a ball of pure power shot toward them. Both Hel and Thor sprang away, and rock and dirt exploded. Thor barely had time to find his balance before Loki did it again, ignoring Hel for favor of attacking Thor. His eyes, normally so bright green, were utterly dead and devoid of light.

That was when Hel struck. The Caskets, which had never stopped glowing, each sent a beam of power at Loki, and Thor only had time to open his mouth in furious protest before his brother went down.

"Hel!" he snarled, half tempted to throw Mjölnir at her.

"He is not your brother," she cut him off, looking prepared to attack again.

The blue had disappeared as Loki struggled to find his feet, but he didn't have time. The Caskets sent him flying back this time, smashing into the upright stone to which he'd been bound. It crumbled, sending up a thick cloud of dust and dirt. Hel paused, and Thor held his breath. The dust began to settle as Loki rose again. This time, however, it was gold that rose in the air around him. Hel's eyes widened and she took a step back.

"Loki," Thor entreated, "please. I won't fight you."

"Then die," Loki said in a strange, empty tone. His hands came up, and this time it was a wave of gold light.

Frigid hands locked around his wrist, and suddenly they were back in that room in Hel's fortress.

Seething, Thor shoved her away from him. "Take us back! This instant!"

Hel didn't acknowledge him right away, returning the Caskets to their pedestals. When she faced him, her eyes were cold and sad. "I cannot. That was not your brother, prince. That was a creature of thoughtless instinct, made slave to the Mad Titan's will. Did you not see the blue seiðr? Unless I am very much mistaken, it belongs to Thanos. Which means he stripped every drop of seiðr from Loki's veins and replaced it with his own. Do you have any idea what that does to a mage of Loki's power?"

"No," Thor answered truthfully, heart beginning to feel heavy with dread.

"It is rape," she said, her voice hard and arctic, "of the worst kind. Even if it weren't for the stain of Yggdrasil in his skin, that alone would drive Loki to utter madness. It would be like draining your blood and replacing it with acid. That crystal in his chest must be keeping him connected to Yggdrasil, else he never would have survived it." She clenched her fists and covered her eyes. "How much more can possibly be inflicted upon him?"

"Loki has survived worse," Thor offered.

"No, Prince," she denied him. "If he survives, he will never be the same. He may never even use magic again."

Thor stared at her, struck dumb. *What? Surely not.* That was what made Loki . . . himself. He had to physically shake himself. "No. I do not accept that. I can and I will save my brother."

Her lips quirked in the beginnings of a smile. "I am not sure I can believe that, but I will trust to hope. Thanos will already have taken him elsewhere, though. Since I now know I can track Loki, we should have a plan for our next confrontation."

Thor heaved a sigh. "Yes. And there are others who will want to help. Others who have the right to try."

"Yes, your humans. Very well. I will wait until you have need of me."

"Thank you, Hel." He turned to go.

A cold hand touched his arm above the elbow. Hel's eyes were now endlessly dark. "You must prepare yourself, Thor. As he is, Loki cannot be allowed to roam unchecked. You may find yourself having to choose your brother . . . or everything else."

Thor nodded but said nothing. He couldn't allow himself to even consider his brother wouldn't fight for his own freedom. He'd lost Loki twice. He could not bear to lose him a third time.

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"He should be back by now," the Aether said for the eleventh time.

Normally, it would irritate the crap out of Tony to hear someone repeat themselves over and over again. Maybe because he felt the exact damn same, he could only agree. He had the absurd wish he was an Asgardian so he could call on that guy who operated the Bifrost.

He'd actually tried to take the Aether from around his neck when he woke from the dreamscape. She had startled him by pleading with him not to. She did not like feeling cut off, she confessed, and she so desperately missed her creator. The depth and weight of that love had overwhelmed Tony, almost making him feel like crying. The pendant sat around his neck still, over a day later, the black glow swirling restless and ceaseless.

"Sir," Jarvis said abruptly, "on the roof."

Just as Tony looked to the huge glass doors to the helipad. He bolted to his feet as Thor appeared in the rush of light and energy he'd come to recognize as the Bifrost.

Finally, finally, the Aether thought. It was more an impression than words, but Tony wholeheartedly agreed.

Thor's expression put him on edge. The large Aesir warrior looked troubled, and he offered Tony no smile or even welcome. "We should sit," he said by way of greeting. His eyes fell on the Aether pendant with a glare. "I wish you would take that off."

"Why?" Tony demanded with a glare of his own, following back into the foyer and throwing himself down on the couch. He idly thought of that day when Loki's magic had run out of control and destroyed everything in this room. That felt like eons ago.

"It's garish, and it does not belong to you," Thor snapped.

His tone of voice threw Tony a little. "She wants to feel like part of the search," he said, his own voice's tone darkening to something like a growl. "What's wrong with that?"

"It isn't a person," Thor rumbled, looking like he would physical force the issue. "It's just a weapon."

Tony resisted the urge to cup the pendant in a protective hand. The Aether's voice railed in his head, her fury further enhancing his own. "Just drop it and tell me what the hell took you son long to get back."

After a few more seconds of tension, Thor finally lowered himself to perch on the edge of a chair opposite the sofa. "Hel came up with a way to track Loki," he said.

"And?" Tony urged, wondering why the blonde juggernaut didn't look happy.

"And we will track him," Thor replied.

Tony felt his insides knot up as he straightened. "You didn't tell me to sit for that. I want to know everything."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I don't care what you think," Tony spat.

Dark brown eyes clashed with sky blue, and not for the first time Tony found himself wishing he could use magic. Then he could use the Aether to make Thor talk. But then Thor sighed and relented.

"Very well. But I warn you, the situation is dire."

Tony tensed again.

"This isn't like when the Shadow Witch took him," Thor went on. "Loki is . . . not himself. Thanos has done something to him, something from which it will be very difficult for Loki to recover."

"Yeah, he stabbed him with that blade so Yggdrasil had access to him," Tony said, waving a hand. He already knew that.

Thor's jaw tightened a little. "That is not all. He implanted Loki with a crystal rod that does so much more than simply trap Loki in that terrible power. It is *inside* him. In his blood, in his veins, where it can become part of him. Worse still, Thanos has drained Loki's seiðr and replaced it with his own." A hand came up and covered his mouth.

"With his own magic, Loki may have been able to hold Yggdrasil at bay," Thor went on, softer now. "With a second foreign energy coursing through him, he will be struggling simply to stay alive. It also allows Thanos to control his physical body."

Tony stared at him, dumbstruck. Somehow, he had imagined his lover might be imprisoned somewhere, still glaring at his captor and fighting with all his strength and possibly succeeding. He would stroll into Stark Tower any moment, just like he had done after he killed the witch. The Aether had gone disturbingly silent and still.

"So . . . he's helpless?" he managed after a moment.

Thor's unhappy grimace answered that for him. "Yes."

"But we can track him," Tony said, clinging onto the only good news in the last two days. "We can find him. We can take the fight to that bastard and get Loki back." He didn't care how badly hurt Loki was. If he was alive, he had absolute confidence in his ability to bring his lover back from the very brink of madness.

"He needs no one else save us," the Aether finally spoke again. *"You and I, human-Anthony. You are the only one who loves him as much as I."*

It was almost painful to hear her speak those words, and this time he didn't resist the urge to cup the crystal. *You got that right,* he thought.

"When we have gathered, yes," Thor said. "There are many who have offered to come to Loki's aid. Insisted, even. My mother is rallying them in Asgard."

"And how long will that take?" Tony demanded. Even one more second felt like too much.

"We need be patient only a bit longer," Thor replied, "and then I will bring the Avengers to Asgard once more."

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"Are you sure of this, little one? You needn't struggle so. I am right here. I am all you need."

Those words hold far too much sway over him, now. Always before he could cling to himself. To green. To Loki. Now he does not remember the color green, and Loki is just a shadow of a memory. It is almost lost, now. His entire being is shaking wildly. This is such a risk. Such a risk. He cannot extend himself much further without breaking. But he must. He must.

The dreamscape is different than he remembers. Once, there were wild colors that clash and dance. Now there is a dark sky with no stars and a frozen moon. The ground is crunchy with frost, but he does not feel cold. He can feel nothing at all. He scans the sky, feeling the strain of being here instantly.

I cannot break. Not now. Not yet.

A frozen puddle on the ground with a mirror-smooth surface catches his attention, and he stares at himself in dull horror. His eyes are glowing gold. Rivers of gold track the entire surface of his skin, the ragged wounds ugly and raw. He recalls he used to be able to control his appearance. Now he cannot. It is all he can do to cover his naked form with plain breeches.

Far, far above, there is a spark of sky blue. The color is so different from what he has seen he latches on at once. The dreamscape heavens open, and all at once there he is. The one whose eyes are sky blue. Gleaming silver armor, flowing red cape, long but trimmed golden hair.

He stares at him, eyes hungry for the sight of something that once meant *normal*.

"Brother!"

He skitters backward when sky blue reaches for him, feeling a rush of unnatural panic.

The other halts. "Loki?" Soft. Hesitant.

Loki. Yes. He is Loki. Green. Loki. He licks his lips. "Thor," he croaks, his voice dry from constant screaming. Odd. That should not translate into the dreamscape.

The god of thunder again moves forward, and again Loki moves back. He knows he cannot allow touch. He is not at all sure what would happen to him if he lowers his guard, even for a split second. Thor again stops, his eyes pained and longing.

"I only have a little time," Loki whispers, half reaching for his brother before his hand falls back to his side. "Thanos does not know I have this much of myself left, and he must never."

Hope flares, painfully bright, in Thor's eyes. "I knew you were still fighting." Full of confidence.

Loki almost laughs. "Please listen," he murmurs. "I know what Thanos is planning, and you must be prepared for it. He will use me to tear open the doorways outside of the Nine Realms. He will call to Death, and she will hear. She will return to the Nine, and they will be ill prepared to receive her."

Thor's face darkens in dismay.

Loki takes a step toward him. "He will have to step through in order to call for her," he says, the strain increasing by the second. "He will have to step out of the Nine."

Thor's eyes widen as he catches on. "Then we close the doors. Seal them behind him."

Loki smiles. "That won't work. I will have to step through with him. He will simply use me to reopen them."

"Then, what?" Thor asks, looking hopelessly at his brother.

"I will destroy them," Loki replies. "All of them. Once he has gone through."

It takes less than a second for Thor to shake his head, adamant. "No. Then *you* will be trapped outside the Nine."

"No," Loki denies, knowing he will soon lose this connection. "It will take every iota of strength I possess. I will not survive."

Thor's entirety, from expression to posture, went rigid. "No. *No*. I will not allow that. You will *not* sacrifice yourself for this, Loki!"

"There is no choice," Loki says simply. His brother must see.

"There is always a choice!" Thor argues, moving again. "We will take you back from him, we know how to locate you now!"

The smile returns as Loki again moves back. "This is the only way, Thor. I am almost gone anyway. I am almost lost to the pull of Yggdrasil. You cannot save me."

Thor seems to deflate, halting. His shoulders hunch forward and his chin lowers toward his chest. "No. This *cannot* be the only way!"

Loki inches toward him, wishing he could touch his brother. "You cannot stop him from using me," he says quietly. "You can only use me to stop him."

Thor's head comes up. "And what do I tell Mother? Stark? They will be heartbroken."

Stark. A face ripples across Loki's memory. He had almost forgotten . . . emotion tugs at his heart. "Tell them both I'm sorry," he whispers, "but this is the only way. If you confront Thanos, I will be forced to fight you. With Yggdrasil coursing through my veins, I will kill you. All of you."

A single tear courses down Thor's careworn cheek. "Speak your plan, brother."

Smiling, Loki tells him.

Fifty-Seventh Installment

Fifty-Seventh Installment: Powerful

Asgard felt large and cold to Thor. Never had he felt Loki's absence more keenly than he did right now. As his booted footsteps echoed to the vaulted ceilings, he renewed his vow to himself. *I will save you, little brother. I will not lose you again!*

Odin had set aside a war council room for his son, the Avengers, and the rest of those who would fight at their side to help Loki. After making promises to his mother that he would fill her in after the meeting, Thor opened the enormous oak door and strode in. The quiet conversation in the room died as expectant eyes all turned to him. Thor nodded to them, moving to the head of the table. Never had any war council he'd attended felt so desperately important.

"My friends," he began, leaning forward and bracing his palms on the table, "I need not tell a one of you how gravely important it is we succeed in the battle to come." He felt a pang. The battle against Thanos would only be the smallest part of it. The main conflict would be saving his little brother from the horrors the Mad Titan had inflicted upon him.

Every face seemed to reflect the same feeling. The Avengers, Freyr, Faðir, Fiqlvarr, Sindri, Brokkr, and Hel were all with him. A small but powerful group. And that wasn't even to mention the Aether, looking strange and foreign hanging around Stark's neck.

"Loki managed to communicate with me," the god of thunder said, "and despite his own torment he still managed to glean what Thanos plans and how to stop him. It is dangerous and will not be easy, but it will work.

"The Mad Titan now has the power to break apart the seals my father and grandfather Borr placed on the gates to the universe outside the Nine realms," Thor went on. "He will tear the gates open and step through to call to Death."

"So that's what he's after," Freyr murmured, mostly to himself. "I had wondered."

"We have known uncommon peace since her departure," Sindri said, tone aggressive as usual.

"Agreed," Hel said in her shadowy-soft voice. "The consequences of her return would number many and grave."

Thor actually felt his lips wanting to quirk into a grin at that unintended pun. The mirth evaporated quickly. "The amount of energy it will require from Loki to break those seals will be enormous," he said. "Thanos isn't trying to safeguard the life of his captive—Loki will be destroyed. That, of course, is the absolute last thing I mean to allow."

Mirroring expressions of stony determination filled the face of everyone gathered.

"Loki explained it would take him quite some time to break down the seals," Thor explained, "and as long as Thanos doesn't monitor too closely he won't be able to tell Loki's actually destroying the gates. That is where we come in. Thanos can control Loki's body, but he cannot control his mind. With our might pitted against the Mad Titan, he won't have the necessary focus to glean Loki's true intent."

"That's an assumption, my prince," Hel said quietly. "You don't know that for certain. None of us

do."

"The alternative being," Sindri snapped, glaring at her, "do nothing?"

"From what Thor has told us," Faðir spoke up, "Loki has the power of all Yggdrasil flowing through his veins. If Thanos manages to turn him against us, we will be killed. Quickly and easily."

"Not enough of a reason not to try," Brokkr said, calmer than his brother but still piqued.

"Loki wouldn't want us to throw our lives away," Steve said, sounding a bit distant, "after he tried so hard to save them."

"You're just a human," Sindri sneered. "You may throw your life away all you wish and it will amount to nothing. If the rest of you will lift not a finger to help Loki, then my brother and I will go alone!"

"Peace, my gentle dwarves," Freyr said, stirring from his seat. "I am certain every soul in this room will do everything they can to protect our Loki. Lady Hel, while I agree caution is in order, any action we take will be a bit of a leap of faith. The challenge we face is quite like any other. Yggdrasil is not a pool of magic a mage can tap into and turn against another living soul, and yet that is exactly what Thanos has forced Loki to do. We cannot be certain what will happen, but we can be certain what will if we don't at least try."

"Loki will die," Thor confirmed, voice frigid, "and all the Nine will be in grave peril from a wrathful force equaled in power only by Yggdrasil Herself."

"And doubtful She will lend a helping hand against Her counterpart," Hel said, lips twitching in a ghost of a smile. "Many, *many* will die. The Allfather and myself among them."

"And I," Freyr added, "for it was my Ljósálfar and I who betrayed Death to her exile when we turned against her and Mad Titan. Eons ago, that was." That last he murmured as if only to himself.

Thor found himself quite impressed by the king's gentle manner and the confidence with which he soothed Sindri and Brokkr's righteous anger. It reminded him a bit of Loki, for his little brother's clever tongue had assuaged many a ruffled noble in its time. Back before the Odinson brothers had been torn apart.

"We are agreed, then?" Hel asked. "A head-on confrontation with the Mad Titan? I presume this battle for Loki and all the Nine is to take place in Midgard?"

"It is the gathering place of the gates," Thor said. "We have friends on Midgard who will be able to tell exactly when and where Thanos appears. The Bifrost can take us there in seconds."

Hel smiled. "Why don't I use the Caskets? Far less conspicuous."

Thor didn't miss the strange look Freyr gave the lady of the Underworld, but the elf king said nothing. Thor nodded to Hel.

"Agreed. If you have no further questions, then I should return to Midgard."

They had none.

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Freyr, Tony decided, was an ass. He kept remembering Loki's admonishment that jealousy didn't

become him, but he couldn't help it. The Light Elf king was just a little too smooth. With his long shiny hair and his big shiny eyes and his stupid shiny armor, he looked like a pinup boy for Tolkien's Middle Earth. It pissed him off. As soon as Thor was satisfied with their little convention, Tony immediately stood up to leave.

The shiny king somehow managed to intercept him without drawing any attention to it. "You're his lover, aren't you?" Not quite a question.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?"

Freyr gave a half smile, gesturing at the Aether pendant. "This. Loki would not have given it to just anyone."

Lifting his chin, Tony wished he had another two inches of height so he'd be eye-level with this ass. "Yeah, he's my lover. Got something to say about that?"

"Not particularly," the king said in that shiny smooth voice of his. "I merely wanted to meet the man who swept him away from me. I must admit, I was not expecting a human."

"We got a special bond, him and me," Tony said, folding his arms and leaning back as if totally at ease. "First time we met, he tried to kill me." Let the bastard make of that what he would.

Freyr, however, just chuckled lightly. "When did murder turn to lust?"

The insinuation of that seemingly-innocent question made Tony *mad*. The Aether responded to his anger, though not as vehemently as she always did to Loki's emotions. "It didn't," he all but snarled, spinning on his heel and stalking away. He half hoped the Aether would make some snide comment about the king, but she did not.

Freyr, however, wasn't quite finished: "I'm relieved. You will live but the blink of an eye. I can easily wait that long."

That got a response out of her. *"Ignore him. I've chosen you, human-Anthony. Only getting our Loki back matters."*

He decided to take her advice and didn't respond to the Light-Elf. The Aether was right. Only Loki mattered.

Fifty-Eighth Installment

Fifty-Eighth Installment: The Beginning of the End

"Is this strange for you?"

Jane looked up from the computer she was using in Stark's lab. The lab's owner was nowhere to be found, which was just as well. His anxiety was making him edgy and more than rude, downright unpleasant. He wasn't even bothering to apologize any longer. "Is what strange?"

Thor leaned against the edge of her desk. He looked toned and firm and sexy in a pair of dark blue jeans and a warm red-brown tee shirt. "Helping us find Loki? Helping a man you once hated?"

"I wouldn't say I *hated* him," she said. Hate was such a strong word. "I hated what he *did*, and that he did it, and I really didn't like him at all, but . . . he's not easy to dislike. After I started working with him and getting to know him, it was just so easy to believe that he wasn't trying to destroy Earth or take it over or anything."

Thor gave her a smile half amused, half rueful. "Did I ever tell you his nickname was Silvertongue, for how easily he could convince anyone of anything?"

Leaning back in her chair a little, she adjusted her monitoring equipment again. "No, but it suits him." Pausing, she looked up at the man she loved. "After this is all over, I won't tolerate you disappearing like before. Everything we face in the future, we face together."

Reaching over, Thor took her hand in his. It was so much bigger than her own. He lifted it to his lips and pressed them to her knuckles. "I agree. When this is over, I wish to make you my wife."

That was hardly a romantic, down-on-one-knee proposal, but Jane found she couldn't care less. Surging up out her chair, she threw her arms around his neck and pressed her body close to his chest. Their lips met with gentle persuasion despite the frantic movement. The kiss lingered sweetly until he dragged his lips to her ear.

"I love you, Jane Foster."

His facial hair tickled her cheek as she turned her head so their eyes met again. "I love you too."

Her computer pinged.

o0o 0o0 o0o

The Mad Titan might have picked the same location the Avengers had because he believed they'd never think of that. He might have picked it to be ironic. Or there may have been no decision making involved at all, he simply went to a gate's last-known location. Whatever the case, Jane Foster's clever astronomical anomaly detection software told her the second anything happened, and Hel used the Caskets to instantly take the gathered army to face their greatest foe.

Tony broke for the sky the instant Wyoming's desert materialized. He was so beyond waiting, and the Aether was practically vibrating around his neck. She was just as impatient as he. Little more than a half-second passed before the air rippled and shifted, splitting open like a moldy curtain and spilling that now-familiar golden light.

The Aether had suggested Tony just snatch Loki and run as soon as he appeared, and Tony half

hoped the god of mischief would be the first one through the new opening in the air. Of course, real life was never that easy. Tony got his second glimpse of the Mad Titan, and it wasn't any better than the first. Bluish, craggy skin. Dead black eyes. Square features. Broad, boxy, and ugly. In a sudden fit of hateful rage, Tony flew at him, egged on by the Aether's fury.

He didn't get very close before dark blue light sprang up around the Mad Titan, spilling outward in a glowing flood too fast to completely avoid.

"Don't get too close to them!" Steve's voice barked in his ear. "Stick to the plan, Stark! A lot of people will get hurt if you don't!"

Tony's first uncharitable thought was, "*Fuck 'em.*" A second later he managed to dial his rage back a notch and returned to where his companions were waiting for Thanos to notice them.

The Mad Titan looked down with an ugly sneer. "Human maggots. Think you have a ghost of a chance at stopping me? Loki."

Tony's heart leaped at the name of his lover. He looked up in time to see the Aesir appear through the hole in the air, and Tony had to fight back his horror. Deep, ragged wounds covering an all-too thin body, completely naked and sickly pale. The wounds flowing with liquid gold. A circle low in his chest fully three centimeters in diameter, the crystal rod Thor had mentioned. Hollow eyes no longer green and mocking but now dark, dark blue and empty.

"Loki," he whispered, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It was replaced moments later with an even hotter fury. Fuck driving Thanos from the Nine Realms! He wanted this fucking bastard *destroyed*!

Help him! Help him! We have to help him! the Aether railed in his mind, her own rage and fear pulling at him.

After just a second of that vacant gaze, Loki's hands spread, palm down, and a dark blue light gathered between them. The sheer *wrongness* of that color momentarily froze Tony, and he could only stare. Loki's magic was *green*!

"Go, go!" Steve's voice shouted, and that galvanized Tony into motion just as the god attacked.

The suit's maneuverability easily avoided the blast of magic that Loki rained down on them, and even as more dark blue began gathering around him, Jarvis let out a warning.

"I'm detecting a second buildup of energy, sir," he said, "different from the first."

Absolutely unwilling to attack Loki, Tony flew up higher. His lover didn't track him, all his focus seeming to be on Thor. Jarvis was right. Gold was gathering behind Loki, the god seemingly able to divide his attention between his enemies and his purpose here.

"We need to make this look convincing," Steve's voice crackled in his ear.

Tony resisted the urge to scowl. He didn't even want to pretend-attack Loki. What if his lover misunderstood? Or worse still, attacked back? He didn't want to face down a murderous god of mischief again. Their relationship was still in too-fragile a state for that. Even so, he fired a few halfhearted rounds at him, trying to aim close enough but still far enough away. They didn't draw Loki's attention, and Tony winced at the blast of dark blue magic the younger Aesir sent toward the elder. Thor neatly dodged, and the earth below erupted in a shower of rock and dust.

"He's really not pulling any punches," Tony muttered, hating Thanos a little more for controlling Loki like this. "All right, they're both here, so where the hell is—?"

"I'm here," Hel's voice smoothly interrupted.

The lady of the underworld of the Nine appeared out of thin air directly above Thanos. With the four Caskets orbiting her like little freaky boxes of doom and her already freaky-as-hell appearance, she looked like a living nightmare. Thanos didn't even see her as she unleashed unholy hell on him—and an enormous wave of liquid power began descending on him.

Loki did see it, his dark blue eyes casting the briefest glance upward at her before his focus returned to attacking Thor. Tony felt a burst of love, hope, and pride.

He's not under your control completely, you fucking asshole. You'll have to do a lot more than that to control my Loki!

Hel blasted Thanos clean out of the sky with the power of her Caskets.

oOo

Though Hel had been accused before of being the most unfeeling creature in the Nine, she cared about some things very much. Preserving the natural order of things was one. Quiet was another. Power was another. And against all odds, Loki was one. He was chaos to her order, but he was just so interesting. So, unleashing the power of the Caskets on Thanos was more than part of a plan to her. It was revenge for the horrible things he'd done to Loki.

Rather unfortunately, Thanos was too powerful to be killed so easily. The combined force of the Caskets was strong enough to kill, certainly, but Thanos sensed it at the last second. He managed to throw up a dark blue shield while attempting to dodge.

The Caskets tore the shield to shreds and sent Thanos to the earth in a tremendous spray of dust and stone.

A split second later, Hel saw it. The Mad Titan was forced to relinquish some of his control over Loki, and two things happened. First, Loki stopped attacking the Avengers, and the dark blue light disappeared. Second, she sensed his focus shift to Yggdrasil and the opening of the gates.

Well, she amended with an inward smile, their destruction as well. She quickly renewed her attack against Thanos to keep him busy. For this to work, the Mad Titan could not be allowed to learn Loki's true purpose here.

She also knew, despite Thor's best intentions, Loki would die today. There was simply no way he could survive what he was about to do.

oOo

For the first several minutes, Clint was at a pretty severe disadvantage. With Thanos and Loki both standing in midair like it was ground, he didn't have his usual vantage. Wyoming wasn't exactly known for its trees and cliffs, either, the scrubby sagebrush country hilly but not lending itself well to getting above one's opponent. Then Hel blasted Thanos to the earth and that helped a lot.

It also helped when Loki stopped attacking the Avengers, that unnatural blue light disappearing to be replaced by liquid gold. Clint quickly switched his arrows to the exploding heads, nocking three to his bow and firing where Thanos had fallen. From what Hel and Thor had explained, this wouldn't do much more than annoy the Mad Titan.

Hopefully it would sting, too.

The explosions sent up another great shower of dirt and rock, and Clint saw Steve duck behind his shield with Natasha. Further out, the Light Elf king and his two sons were setting up a perimeter and beginning to work some magic. Opposite them, the two dwarves were quickly putting something together that looked suspiciously like a giant bomb.

Maybe we can't kill the bastard, but we can put some serious hurt on 'im.

oOo

It was painful, seeing Loki in such a state. Freyr tried not to focus on what the young Aesir must have endured, but it wasn't easy. The urge to fly up to him and gather that thin, mortally wounded body in his arms was overwhelming. Hel's voice seemed to murmur in his mind, *stick to the plan.*

Yes, yes. He must focus, or he would be no use to Loki. It was a good plan, even if it had little chance of succeeding in saving Loki.

He tried not to focus on that, either.

The dust had finally begun to clear, and Freyr looked to his two sons. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, Father," they said in unison.

"Good," Freyr said, gesturing to the fallen Mad Titan, "because it's time."

oOo

No sooner had the last particles of dust settled than a large, silvery barrier of magic suddenly formed around the gathering. It was what Thor had been waiting for. Spinning his hammer, lightning began to crackle along its blunt head. As soon as he'd gathered sufficient force, he pointed it at the barrier and charged it with blue-white lightning.

Thanos finally righted himself, looking around with an expression of disdain. "You have trapped yourselves in here with me. Seek you death so hastily?"

"Yours, definitely," Stark's voice grunted over the comm bud each of them wore.

"We decided to give you the chance to parley," Hel's cold, smooth voice said. She appeared at Thor's side, the Caskets still orbiting her body. "Look around you, Mad Titan. Even you will have difficulty defeating the power assembled against you. Release Loki and go. We will take no further action against you."

That, Thor thought with an internal scowl, was a lie. Under no circumstances would he simply allow Thanos to walk from here. He was too dangerous, and he would never leave Loki alone. *That is her promise, not mine.*

Thanos gave Hel an inscrutable look. Then he smiled. "Your threat is empty, Lady. Those Caskets were not intended to be weapons. You will not be able to turn them against me much longer before their power is depleted. Better you had brought the Tesseract. Better still you had not come at all. There is naught left of Loki for me to release. He is an empty shell, bound to the will of Yggdrasil. A creature of pure instinct."

"I do not accept that," Hel said, her frozen voice now haughty. "You do not have the power to erode a man's will."

"Not I," Thanos said. "Yggdrasil. It has consumed him. The paltry might assembled against me here cannot hope to deter me. I will bring Lady Death home!"

Thor was ready for the attack in the half second before Thanos unleashed it, and he raised his Warhammer to meet the challenge head on. Dark blue light clashed with blue-white arcs of lightning, and Thor threw every ounce of his impressive strength behind the attack.

oOo

Despite how it irked Hel to admit, Thanos was right. The Caskets were not weapons, and using them as such drained them. So while Thor and the humans engaged their enemy and Sindri and Brokk prepared their special explosive, Hel used the distraction to take herself to where Loki was diligently working on the gates.

"I'm here," she murmured, knowing he would hear. "What can I do, Loki?"

He didn't look at her, didn't open his eyes, gave no physical indication he'd heard. But, "I'm not ready. I can't . . . it won't . . ."

"I know," she soothed. "Thor may be in denial, but I am not. I know you're going to die. Don't worry about them, I will find a way to tell them. I may even be able to bring you back."

A short, ragged laugh. "No. I am already consumed by Yggdrasil. Just . . . Thor. He will not understand."

Hel smiled. "I'll handle him, don't worry. Is there anything I can do to make this easier for you?"

"Yes," he said after a long moment. "Bring me the Aether."

"Of course." She hesitated. "Would it please you to know that human has been carrying her all this time? Stark?"

Another pause, longer this time. "Anthony . . . she allowed it?"

"Yes," Hel confirmed.

". . . I'm glad."

"The Caskets have enough energy left for a few big attacks," she said. "I'll make them count. And Loki . . . it's been fun."

Was that a ghost of a smile on his face? "It has."

Fifty-Ninth Installment

Fifty-Ninth Installment: Here At the End

Thanos, Jarvis informed him, was wearing an armor of the same material as those damn Chitauri monsters. A chitin-like substance so tough his lasers couldn't penetrate the shell. Tony switched to his little stinging bee missiles, not worried about accidentally hitting Thor with Jarvis guiding them. They still didn't do a lot of damage, but the force of each impact kept knocking Thanos down, which gave Thor openings to smack the bastard but good with his big-ass hammer.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the three Light Elves keeping the barrier active, the dome overhead still bright and alive with Thor's lightning. It would deliver a helluva punch if Thanos tried to escape it before they were ready, but so far the bastard had his hands full with the wrathful god of thunder.

We might just make it after all.

No sooner had the thought formed than Loki suddenly moved again. There was a brilliant flash of blinding golden light, then a beam of it tore through the barrier. It shattered like glass.

"Shit!" Clint's voice burst over the comm bud. "Thor, look out—!"

Tony actually closed his eyes like a frightened child as another beam of gold energy lanced down out of the sky at Thor. He opened his eyes to see Steve running full-tilt toward Thor, who had apparently managed to survive but was half buried under a pile of shale and dirt. Tony flew down and grabbed onto Thor's arm, yanking upward *just* in time to avoid a third blast of Yggdrasil's terrible golden light.

It didn't strike the ground. Instead, it redirected straight toward a smugly grinning Thanos. The Mad Titan had to scramble to avoid being turned into slop, and he still went flying. Tony looked around, shocked, to find Steve standing there. Well, kneeling there, looking completely winded, his shield crumpled into a blackened lump of tin.

"Clever," Hel's voice oozed over the comm bud, "but ill advised. Stark, if I may borrow the Aether? Loki requested her."

"What?" Tony snapped. "He's obviously still under that bastard's control! We don't need to add another weapon to his already impressive arsenal!"

"Loki isn't under his control," Hel said, appearing beside him. "Those attacks were designed to draw attention is all. You'd both be dead if not. Now, the Aether. Please." She held out her hand.

Tony fully intended to deny her, but the Aether chose that moment to finally act up. Ribbons of black light snaked from the crystal pendant, and her angry voice hissed in his head,

If Loki wants me, you won't keep me from him!

"Shit, all right already!" Tony snapped, yanking the chain from around his neck. "But I'm not accepting responsibility for this!"

Hel smiled as she took the pendant. "Nor should you. Thor, if you're quite all right, I would suggest you return your focus to the Mad Titan. He looks plenty irritated."

That, Tony thought with a monster scowl, was the most profoundly absurd understatement he'd heard in his entire life.

oOo

It wasn't often Natasha Romanova found herself in a situation where she was next to useless. Her skill set was so widely varied she could hold her own against anyone. Not so anymore, it would seem. As she watched Steve's shield all but melt under the horrifying power of Yggdrasil, she decided to take herself out of the main action.

Sprinting to where the two dwarves were working on their special explosive, she knelt at the side of Brokkr. At least, she thought it was Brokkr. "What can I do?" she asked.

"Nothing," Sindri said shortly.

"Her hands are smaller than ours," Brokkr said, frowning at his brother. Now to Natasha, "Slip your hand here between these two rods. You should be able to feel two spherical protrusions. Can you feel them?"

Trusting the dwarf wouldn't ask her to do anything lethal, Natasha obeyed. "Yes."

"Good. Keep your hand between them. It will prevent the magical reaction while we load these two chambers. And don't worry, this isn't dangerous until we load the crystal catalyst."

Ah well, if they failed here they'd all be dead anyway. Might as well stick her hands in magical incendiary devices she didn't understand. "No problem."

"Is the cloaking shield still in place around us?" Sindri asked her.

She glanced out to where Thor and Thanos had once again locked in their duel. Clint and Tony were doing little more than providing annoyance, and she could see the three Light Elves working on restoring the barrier to keep Thanos pinned down.

"I think so," she replied. If it weren't, surely Thanos would be all over them.

According to Hel, this particular magical explosive packed the meanest punch in all the Nine Realms. She had smiled when stating,

"It makes your atomic warheads look like an aggressive kitten."

Really, Natasha didn't want to think about that. The barrier, the guardian of the underworld had said, would prevent any damage spreading to Earth, not that it should be any problem. Assuming their plan worked.

She was confident it would.

oOo

Though his "ability" oft had him charging fearlessly into any fray, Bruce Banner hung back as the battle for the realms and Loki's sanity unfolded. He'd been tasked primarily with making sure Thanos didn't get too close to the three Light Elves as they maintained their barrier. So far the so-called Mad Titan hadn't expressed an iota of interest in them. Either their barrier was no threat to him, or his hands were too full with Thor to shift focus.

Hel had also promised he would not be fighting with all his power anyway, part of it reserved for

keeping Loki working on opening the gate.

Not that it would give them much of an edge in the conflict, she'd warned the Avengers. Bruce could see why with great dismay. Thanos may not be fighting at full strength, but Loki was protecting him with that golden light Thor said came from Yggdrasil. The "Tree of Life" on whose branches the realms rested. A frightening power he hoped never to encounter again after this.

Fortunately, Thanos didn't seem able to wield it himself.

Finally, the barrier abruptly reformed. "You should go to his aid," the Light Elf king said in that smooth voice of his. "It will allow Thor to recharge the barrier with his lightning."

Bruce glanced at him, assured himself the three of them were truly all right, and changed forms without a backward glance. A few lunges had him within reach of Thanos, and he flung himself at the Mad Titan with all the strength he possessed.

oOo

There was a loud *crunch* as Banner hit Thanos, sending up a cloud of dust. Thor used the momentary reprieve to quickly recharge the barrier, glancing up at his brother. Nothing had changed, and he seemed to take no notice of the barrier. Taking that as a good sign, Thor sent him mental encouragement.

Just a little longer, brother. I have my own plan to save you, and it will work.

From his vantage on a shallow bluff in the land, Barton let loose a barrage of arrows. Thor leaped up, charging his beloved Warhammer and sending white-hot lightning arcing down onto the bolts. They crackled madly as they flew through the air, and Thor followed them. A few arrows struck the armor and bounced away, but the energy of the lightning seemed to find its mark. Thanos let out a bellow of pain, managing to smack the remaining arrows away from striking his face.

He did not manage to slap Thor away. The god of thunder descended on him like a falling mountain.

At the last possible second, Thanos abruptly summoned a thick staff of pure energy, locking with Thor's hammer and preventing it from smashing into his skull. The lightning still raced up the length, and for a second Thanos went rigid. A second was all Thor needed, and he sent pulse after pulse of lightning into his enemy until Thanos was forced backward. A blow from Banner's giant green fist had something else crunching, and the Hulk grabbed onto the Mad Titan's armor and *wrenched*.

It went sailing toward the barrier and bounced off, and this time Thor's blow sent Thanos himself into the barrier, striking hard and crashing to the earth in a rain of upset dirt. Thor's burst of hope lasted not the blink of an eye. A golden glow instantly lit up the area where Thanos had fallen, and the Mad Titan rose to hover centimeters off the ground.

"For all your might, little Odinson," he sneered, "you forget two things. I am more powerful than you, and I control your brother!"

In the sky, Loki's body suddenly pulsed with blinding light, gold pouring out from him in an expanding spherical wave. It slammed into the barrier and again it shattered. It slammed into Banner, Thor, and the three Light Elves and sent them all flying.

The pain was incredible, and for several horrifying moments, Thor thought he was dying. Then, as if Loki were whispering right next to his ear, *"You must get up, brother. I am almost done. You*

must keep his attention away from me."

Hope, love, and rage surged through Thor, more powerful even than Yggdrasil's force. He sent that raw emotion flooding down into his Warhammer and flung it with all his might.

oOo

Hel watched in growing dismay as Thanos managed again to turn Loki against his friends and family. From her position directly above the god of mischief, she assessed the ongoing battle.

Loki's attack had sent the green human and the archer flying. The archer, she thought grimly, probably wouldn't survive. The green human was incredibly hardy, he might. The three Light Elves were all unconscious, and she saw Thor rise with renewed determination on his handsome face.

Small miracle, the two dwarves and human woman were all still undetected by Thanos and untouched by the blast from Yggdrasil. She knew Loki was aware of them, and she shook her head in amazement he was managing to resist the Mad Titan's control enough to protect them. That device would be what determined the outcome of this little conflict.

Not so little, she amended with a grimace. Small blessing that there were no human civilizations anywhere around.

"All right," Hel said softly, gently squeezing the god's tear crystal in her hand. "For this to work, my dear, you must be free of this gilded cage. Are you ready?"

Yes, yes, yes! the Aether chanted, her desperation palpable.

"You cannot rejoin your beloved just yet," Hel reminded her. "We need to sever the Mad Titan's connection to him once and for all."

I have not forgotten, the Aether snapped. *I am ready. Release me!*

Sincerely hoping Loki's faith in the Aether was so absolute because she would not betray him, Hel cupped the crystal in both hands and lifted it over her head. "Then defend him!"

The crystal shattered into a million pieces.

oOo

She swarms into the dark. The dark spaces between places. The dark space where he used to keep her. Where he'd had her wait so long before she could be with him. She'd been so eager, so happy to go into that strange crystal. Whatever he wanted, she would do.

Will do.

Attacking the one who is torturing her beloved, that she will do all too gladly.

There, in the darkest part of the dark, she can sense her own. The rest of what she never used to consider a body but somehow now she does. It is roiling, black as pitch and cold as ice. She plunges down into it, consciousness reuniting with form. She writhes in the not-air, thick and agile as a serpent, coiling in and around and through.

She does not pause to enjoy the sensation. Her beloved is waiting for her. He needs her, and she will never, EVER allow him to be separated from her again.

She knows Hel thinks Loki will die.

She will not allow that, either.

Whatever it costs, she will protect her creator.

oOo

Hel watched the Aether disappear and hoped she hadn't made a mistake. But it was done now, and she wouldn't dwell on it. Far below, she watched the conflict renew between Thor and Thanos, Anthony Stark continuing to annoy the Mad Titan with his little missiles. The Aether wouldn't be long, so Hel reached up and tapped the comm bud in her ear.

Strange—but extremely useful—technology.

"Thor, I'm going to add a little power to your Warhammer. Try to get some distance between you and Thanos."

Thor immediately launched himself up in the air, and Stark doubled the pressure with his stinging missiles. They didn't do much damage, but they did draw the Mad Titan's ire. Hopefully it wouldn't cost the human his life. She became peripherally aware of the green beast-human gathering his wits, and she was grateful he hadn't died.

As soon as Thor had a little height, pouring his fury into his weapon, Hel commanded the Caskets back to full power, and as Thor lifted his arm she sent that power streaming straight into his hammer.

And as the god of thunder shifted his body forward to strike, the Aether suddenly reappeared. Liquid black and red and writhing she poured herself down Thor's arm, a miasma of destruction around the hammer's head.

oOo

Never in all the years of his life could Thor have imagined he would be fighting a battle with the Aether as his ally. His *sentient* ally. It sent a shiver over the surface of his skin when he felt it add its strength to his, but it didn't slow his momentum as he once again threw himself down at Thanos. The Mad Titan had an ugly sneer on his face.

Thor had the great pleasure of seeing his enemy's eyes widen at the combined power of thunder, the Caskets, and the Aether. A horrible kind of shrieking laugh filled the air as Thor drove downward, and he realized it was the Aether. Despite his obvious misgivings, Thanos nevertheless rose to meet the attack.

When they clashed, the shock-wave tore into the surrounding earth in an expanding wave over a thousand meters in radius. A deafening boom filled the air, and Thor drove Thanos down with a roar of sheer rage. The Aether swarmed down around Thanos with ravening hunger, and the golden light surrounding him suddenly winked out.

Dust, dirt, and rock erupted as Thor slammed the Mad Titan down into the hardened earth. For a second, Thor thought he finally had him. The next second, that golden light flared again, and Thor swore he heard the Aether screaming as Yggdrasil's power tore into her. The red-black miasma dissipated, and Thor once again felt that dreadful power slam into him, too fast to avoid.

The pain crushed the air from his lungs, so intense he only distantly felt his body strike earth. Darkness swarmed his vision, and he tasted blood. Then, just as he thought the black would claim

him,

" Please, brother! Get up! Please get up!"

And Thor's blue, blue eyes opened wide as crimson-ebony destruction went pouring down his throat.

oOo

Once, she thinks dimly, she did this once before. She has only the vaguest memories of it, for she had not yet fully awakened. Had not been awakened. He called himself Malekith, and she remembers him with a modicum of fondness. She may even have been content to serve him for a time. He did allow her to be in her natural state.

But he is not Loki. He never once treated her as anything other than an energy force to be used. Loki loves her and encourages her to think for herself. To grow.

She loves him with a passion bordering on desperation. She cannot imagine what she will become without him.

She will not lose him to this pathetic creature called Mad Titan.

He is nothing compared to her beloved!

She pours herself into the powerful Aesir warrior Thor. He can challenge Mad Titan. With her aid, he can challenge the weakling and win. He does not resist her forceful entry. He is injured, perhaps he cannot resist. She can hear Loki pleading with this one to rise. It sparks a fury in her so potent she feels she is choking on it.

Get up, warrior! she cries. We will destroy him for what he has done to our Loki!

oOo

Tony felt a little ill as he watched the Aether pouring into Thor. There seemed to be a lot more of her, and it was freaky as shit to see her freed from that crystal. *I sure hope you know what you're doing*, he thought with a glance at Hel.

Thanos obviously understood the importance of what was happening, he flew toward Thor. The downed god of thunder was vulnerable, and Tony quickly zipped down to fire stinging missiles into the ground right in front of him. A shower of dust and dirt did little more than give the guy pause, but it did slow him down. Just enough that the Aether finished entering Thor.

The god of thunder rose, the normal sky blue of his eyes darkened to black. Tony abandoned keeping Thanos busy to go check on Banner. The physicist was definitely recovering from the attack, which was good. He helped haul the Hulk to his feet.

"Maybe you should go check on the dwarves," he suggested.

Banner just grunted, charging off to where Natasha was aiding the two fellows with their bomb. Tony now flew to Barton.

"He's still alive, sir," Jarvis informed him as he got close, a display of vital statistics appearing before Tony's eyes, "but he needs medical attention. Soon."

Landing, Tony took off his helmet and glanced up. His lover hadn't moved, but Tony did a double

take. Was it his imagination, or was Loki looking at him? His eyes were no longer dark blue, now they were gold. And his expression . . .

It looked like goodbye.

Instantly overcome by a desperate need to hold him, Tony jammed his helmet back on and blasted off the ground. He made it less than twenty feet into the air before the damn barrier finally reappeared.

oOo

Since Brokkr and Sindri only needed her hands, Natasha kept her eyes on the ongoing battle against the Mad Titan. She was worried about Clint, her friend still had not risen from where he'd fallen. Banner had joined them, returned to his human form.

"You may remove your hand now," Brokkr said abruptly. "Will you please tell Lady Hel we're finally ready?"

Natasha's heart started to race. *Finally.* "Hel? Thor? We're done with the bomb."

"Loki is ready too," Hel said. She hadn't moved for quite some time, though Natasha knew she was preserving her strength.

Thor didn't reply, but she could hardly blame him. Thanks to the Aether, Thanos now seemed to have his hands full with a vengeful god of thunder. Natasha was glad. She was really starting to dislike that guy.

"Now, Banner," Hel said. "I will keep you concealed until you're close enough for Lady Jane."

Natasha reflexively winced when Thanos went down yet again beneath Thor's hammer, the Aether a living miasma all around him. High overhead, Loki went from simply glowing to emitting a blinding golden glow. She saw his eyes closed, face lined with pain. And she clearly heard his voice in her mind,

"Now, Natasha."

oOo

From her safe spot over a mile away from the actual battle, Jane waited for the word. It was a little strange to know she was integral in a plan such as this, and she was grateful she had an ability now that allowed all this to come together. Her entire body was so tense from the waiting she knew she'd be sore tomorrow. It had been almost two hours since the conflict began. She was starting to feel sick with anxiety.

Then, just when she thought she could take it no more, the comm bud in her ear finally crackled to life.

"Now, Jane!" Natasha's voice barked.

Jane leaped to her feet and spread her hands. *Here goes nothing. Please, please work.*

oOo

It was interesting to see how desperate these people were to save him, Loki thought dimly. It was almost enough to make him smile. It would be harder than he'd thought, leaving them behind.

After what was possibly the longest and worst duration of his entire life, worse even than his fall from the rainbow bridge, Loki finally had every gateway in the Nine Realms lined up. Not a single one could remain standing, or Thanos would find his way back with Death. After all his struggling and suffering, the idea of it being in vain was nigh unbearable.

At his signal, everything began to unfold.

Banner lifted the enormous explosive device the dwarves had crafted and started stomping toward Thanos. Hel used the Caskets to keep him from the Mad Titan's gaze. Thor continued to hammer away at his foe, Stark adding what annoyance he could. The three Light Elves maintained the barrier.

Steady, Loki thought. The timing of this would all have to be absolutely perfect.

And then it all unraveled like a brilliantly-lain tapestry.

Thanos saw Banner. He was intelligent enough to know the explosive device was too deadly for him to combat. He immediately turned to flee. Thor paced him, sending arcs of lightning racing toward the barrier to recharge it. Thanos slammed into it but wasn't quite strong enough to break through. Thor grabbed him from behind in a bear hug, the Aether pouring from his body in a wrathful wave.

Down they went, just as Banner heaved the enormous bomb.

Loki flung his arms wide, and the gateway right above him and Hel tore open. The pain was incredible.

And right below Thor, Thanos, and the bomb, Jane Foster opened a one-way portal. The two battling gods and bomb fell through one end, deposited outside the Nine on the other end. Loki immediately dove through the gate, desperately reaching out and grabbing onto his brother. He yanked with all his might, managing to disentangle him from Thanos. A powerful shove sent the god of thunder tumbling back to Midgard. Thanos didn't follow, obviously no longer caring about any of them. He began his spell to call to Death, too caught up to notice the incendiary device.

The Aether poured out of Thor's body and rushed into Loki's as the god of mischief once more spread his arms, sucking in a labored breath of relief to suddenly feel Thanos' hold on him disappear. Yggdrasil's golden power flooded into him, and he turned it all outward against the gates just as that ridiculously overpowered bomb exploded. The blast slammed into Thanos, instantly stopping his spell, and the powerful shock wave rushed to join the tsunami of golden light. One by one the gates began collapsing. The power coursing through him grew brighter and hotter with every pulse until it was finally too much.

And then everything finally, *finally* washed away.

Epilogue

Epilogue: The Never Ending Journey

Summers in Asgard could be unbearably warm. Thor had never really noticed it growing up, so it was for the first time it actually concerned him. He hurried through his large bedroom chambers, headed for the balcony. The doors had been flung wide, allowing in a breeze that felt slightly cooler than the dead air. Standing leaning against the railing, his wife looked like a goddess. The wind stirred the gossamer-light folds of her gown, clinging to her curves and the gentle swell of her pregnant belly. She had only recently begun to show.

Jane turned when his booted feet scuffed the floor, and she smiled, standing on tiptoe to accept his kiss. "You were gone for a while," she commented.

"Too long a while," he agreed, even though it had been only two days. Even two hours felt too long, these days.

She curled her arms around his waist and rested her head against his chest. "What did Hel say?"

Sighing, Thor squeezed her as tightly as he dared. She had only seemed to become more delicate to him after learning she was carrying his child. A bittersweet announcement that had helped alleviate his grief to a surprising degree, though at times it still felt crushing.

Five months had passed since that day in Midgard. Though their plan had worked, it didn't feel like a victory. Jane's portal had taken him, Thanos, and that dwarven explosive through the gate out of the Nine. He had not expected Loki to shove him back through the gate only an eye blink before the explosive detonated, closing it before Thor could react. He didn't need magic to know the blinding wave of gold had destroyed all the gates.

And when it was done, Hel had told him she could no longer sense a single gateway, and the Allfather and Heimdall had confirmed it.

"Lady Hel just said the same thing she's been saying since that day," he told his wife, pressing his nose to her chestnut-brown hair and inhaling her scent. Cinnamon and vanilla. "Loki is dead."

Jane shifted, pulling back so she could peer into his eyes. "But if he was outside the realms," she said softly, "would Hel really be able to tell?"

Thor kissed her forehead. "Lady Hel said distance makes no difference," he said. Some days, the pain was sharp enough to feel as though it had all happened only yesterday. The royal family hadn't even been able to give Loki a proper funeral service.

"Would Hel know for sure?" Jane insisted. She had been the optimistic voice of hope, somehow confident that Loki had managed to survive after all. "I mean, she is the guardian of the underworld. Didn't she say she hasn't been able to find his soul?"

"She hasn't," Thor confirmed, "but if Loki had well and truly been consumed by Yggdrasil . . ."

Reaching up, she cupped his face in her hands. They were small and soft and smooth. "It isn't like you to be so gloomy. We don't know he died. You should be holding out hope."

He covered her hands with his and pulled them down to his lips. "If I hold onto hope now and learn later he is truly gone, my heart would break."

Of everyone who had known and loved him, only Jane and Frigga seemed sure Loki was still alive. Thor truly wished he could believe it.

Jane sighed softly and tugged on her hands, bringing him down to her level so she could kiss him again. When she pulled back, her eyes were shining. "Just consider what you know of your brother. He's the smartest man we know, he's the most clever, and definitely the most resourceful. If anyone could survive, he could."

Closing his eyes, Thor embraced her again. "Yes," he whispered. He didn't have her confidence, perhaps, but he certainly had faith in Loki's ability to survive.

If you yet live, my brother, I pray I will one day see you again.

oOo OoO oOo

Pepper sighed and saved her file, glancing at the clock. Not quite five pm. Closing her browser, she got up from her comfortable chair and stretched her back and shoulders.

"Jarvis?" she inquired.

"Yes, Miss Potts."

"Where is he?"

"Still in his lab," the AI voice told her.

Rubbing a hand over her face and deciding she'd had enough work for one day, Pepper headed for the door. She didn't get very far before her phone rang. Glancing at the caller ID, she grimaced and answered.

"Hello, Mr. Haynes. Yes, this is Pepper. Yes, I'm at Stark Tower. No, I don't think he'll want to come to the Board Meeting tomorrow. Well, I'll do my best . . . but I can't promise anything. Yes, I know, and I'll be there as usual. Thank you." Rolling her eyes, she pressed the end call button and headed for the kitchen.

The Tower project had certainly represented a different time in her life. Though she still loved Tony with all her heart, it was a different kind of love now. She had accepted his reasons for wanting to end their romantic entanglements, and she didn't regret it.

She did, however, still worry about Tony. That terrible conflict had ended over four months ago, and even though Tony was functioning and working as of two months ago, he was not the same. He had a cold, hard edge to him he'd previously lacked.

As she started making sandwiches, her cell phone rang again. She recognized the ring tone and started smiling. "Hi."

"Hi," Bruce's voice said. "How is our engineer today?"

Spreading some mayo over the bread, she shrugged with the shoulder not holding the phone to her ear. "No better, really. I'm about to bring him some food. He still doesn't eat unless I bring it to him. I don't think he remembers."

A pause. "Do you think he'll ever be himself again?"

"I hope so," she murmured. "It might do him some good to see a friend other than me. Why don't

you come with me tomorrow?"

"Sure," he agreed easily enough. "You going to be home tonight?"

"Yes. I'm just going to make sure he eats, then I'll head home for the day."

"Okay. See you soon. Love you, Pep."

She smiled. "I love you, too."

Hanging up, she went back to making sandwiches. Not everything that had come out of that battle was grief.

oOo

Natasha hopped out of her chair when the phone rang, grabbing it off the kitchen island of the comfortably large apartment she and Steve shared. Clint's name and picture appeared on the screen, and she tapped answer.

"Hey," she said with a smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, actually," her best friend replied. "I think I'm finally up to going and seeing Stark. Banner just told me he and Pepper are going tomorrow, want to join?"

"Sure," Natasha replied. She hadn't seen Stark in about three months, their last interaction in his Tower bordering on hostile.

She understood his volatility. He'd taken Loki's death very, very hard. Personally, Natasha wasn't convinced Loki was dead. He was the craftiest son of a bitch she had ever known, making all her skills look like child's play.

"Banner said Pepper told him Stark is doing better," Clint went on.

In the aftermath of that battle, he'd been the only person wounded. He'd almost died, actually. He'd been in a coma for three months, and for the last two he'd been in intensive physical therapy to rebuild the muscle mass he'd lost.

The first words out of his mouth were, *"Tell me something good came out of that."*

Natasha had been the first to tell him Jane and Thor were married and expecting, and Clint had smiled and said, *"Good."*

And he didn't believe Loki was dead, either. No one discussed it with Tony.

"He's my lover," Tony had snarled the one time Natasha tried to convince him. *"If he were still alive, he would let me know!"*

"Why don't Steve and I pick you up at noon? We can have lunch at the Tower."

"Sounds good," Clint said. "Say hi to your guy for me."

She smiled. "Will do."

As she ended the call, strong arms wrapped around her waist. Steve nuzzled her ear. "How is he?"

She leaned into his embrace and turned her head to kiss his lips. "Good. We're picking him up at

noon tomorrow and going to the Tower to drag Stark out of his lab. Bruce says Tony is doing better, but he could use some human interaction."

"I agree," he said. "Until then, what do you want for dinner?"

Her lips curled into a wicked little grin. "How about we skip dinner and go straight to dessert?"

oOo

At two in the morning, Tony had to stop. He didn't think he'd gotten more than a few hours of sleep in the last four days, working endlessly on his latest project: the mass-production of his clean generator. Stark Industries would be ready for the open market in about one more month.

After that, he had no idea what he would do with himself. Start a new project? Sure. That would do. He had a few things he'd never put any effort into thanks to a lack of time. It would seem he had all the time in the world now.

Thor had quietly told him a few weeks ago that his mother should be able to reverse the anti-aging effect Loki had put on him, but Tony was absurdly reluctant. It felt like throwing away a gift Loki had given him.

Some of the Avengers believed the god was still alive somehow. Hel and Heimdall had assured them Loki was no longer alive because they could not sense his presence. Hel had sworn that between her, the four Caskets, and Heimdall's ability to see all, they would have found him if he were.

Tony hadn't held out hope. His lover was gone.

Maybe in another four months the pain would feel less sharp.

Maybe in another four years he'd start fucking around again.

And in another four decades he would stop feeling so damn heartbroken.

Raking fingers through his greasy, disheveled hair, he staggered up from his chair and headed to his bedroom.

"Sir," Jarvis said, "Miss Potts wanted me to tell you she will be here tomorrow with the rest of the Avengers."

Tony's first reaction was to tell them all to fuck off. After a split second he heaved a sigh and resigned himself. He trudged into the bathroom and took a fast, hot shower. Even though he wanted to collapse into unconsciousness for a year, he made himself shave, tidying up his normal neat, goatee. Despite the cleanness, he still looked far from human.

Turning away, he dropped onto his bed without bothering to put on any clothes. His hand immediately went to his chest, idly rubbing where the arc reactor had once been. His jaw clenched against the well-familiar pain. He hoped that dwarven explosive had killed Thanos. It had really only ever been to prevent him from immediately reentering the Nine Realms while Loki destroyed all the gates. Hopefully it had annihilated the bastard.

Fuck, I don't want to see them tomorrow. They'll be all nice and supportive and try to assure me Loki is still alive. I don't want to hear it anymore!

Despite how tired he was, it still took him over two hours to finally drop into uneasy sleep.

Troubling dreams dogged him, tormented by the sound of Loki's voice calling to him.

" *Stark. Stark. Stark . . .* "

Tony's eyes flew open in the pitch dark of his room. His heart raced, and he wasn't at all sure what had awakened him. Perspiration covered his body, the sheet over him sticking uncomfortably. His chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath.

"Are you finally awake, Anthony?"

Tony sat bolt upright on the bed, head whipping around in the dark. No. It wasn't possible. Right? *Right?* But there, sitting with his ankle propped on one knee and his verdant eyes glittering in amusement, wearing a dark green shirt and brown leather tunic with gold gilding, was Loki. He didn't quite look solid, as if he was just a ghost.

Conflicting emotions sprang up. This was a dream. A trick. A lie. The universe playing the cruelest fucking joke on him.

"This isn't real."

The apparition smiled. "I'm not physically here, if that's what you mean," he said in Loki's arrogant, perfectly accented voice. "But I am *real*."

"You're dead," Tony said flatly.

The ghost's smile widened into a grin. "I assure you, I am very much alive."

A peculiar feeling stole through Tony. "Then where the fuck have you been?" he snarled.

The smile disappeared, and Loki seemed to stare off into nothing. "I may have survived, but it was only barely," he said after a pause. "There were many times I thought I would finally succumb to my injuries and die. It was not my intent to hide myself away, Stark. I was simply too weak to return."

For the first time in nearly five months, hope flared. Bright, hot, painful. "So, you're still alive?"

The smile came back. "Yes."

"But everyone said you were dead," Tony had to make sure. "Hel. Heimdall. Your damn father."

"I have been dead twice before," Loki reminded him with a wicked grin. "They could not find me because I have been outside the Nine Realms all this time. When I destroyed the last gateway, I was on the other side of it."

"Then how are you even here?" Tony demanded. This was feeling less and less real by the second.

"Well," Loki said with a slow smile, "I didn't *quite* destroy the last gate. I left a little piece of it, just in case I did survive. I rather expected not to, but I certainly hoped I would."

Tony's heart started to pound again. "So . . . you're alive? You're coming back?"

"No," Loki said, shaking his head. "There's nothing left for me here. I know Thor married Miss Foster, I have no desire to return to a life I have *long* left behind. I will be leaving the Nine for good."

The hope flickered and died. "Then why bother come back and tell me all this?" He hated that he

sounded so angry. So hurt.

Loki's lips curled into a mischievous smile. "I had thought to ask if you wanted to come with me."

Blink. It felt like the world tipped on its axis and gravity began to slide away toward the sky. A moment of completely disorienting vertigo. Loki was alive. *Alive*. For the first time since his lover had died, Tony suddenly came back to life.

A slow smile answered the smirk. "Sure. Why the hell not."

oOo

When the Avengers arrived the next day, it was Natasha who found a little note taped to Stark's fridge. It simply said, *Gone to see the universe!* with a cheeky little smiley face. She broke into the biggest fucking grin she'd ever felt on her face and started laughing.

"Well. Imagine that."

The end

Watch for the sequel coming soon. ;)

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